

## CHRIST AND HUMAN HAPPINESS

A sermon delivered by Batsell Barrett Baxter on September 27, 1970 at the Hillsboro Church of Christ, Nashville, Tennessee, and heard over radio station WLAC at 8:05 P.M.

Almost everyone, it would seem, is seeking happiness. It is almost instinctive. But the tragedy is that many people never find it. In the words of Henry Drummond, in his famous sermon, "The Greatest Thing In The World," "They are on the wrong scent." Just as hunting dogs occasionally pick up the wrong trail, so great masses of mankind are on the wrong scent in their search for happiness.

Almost universally men seem to believe that happiness will automatically be achieved, if one possesses vast amounts of money and material things, if one possesses power, fame and prestige, if one can claim notable intellectual achievements, or if one can gratify the various desires of the flesh. Historically, man has sought to achieve happiness through one or more of these avenues. However, happiness cannot be equated with any of these things. Many who possess these things are not happy; many who lack them are happy. King Solomon possessed them all, yet it was he who wrote, "Then I looked on all the works that my hands had wrought, and on the labor that I had labored to do; and, behold, all was vanity and a striving after wind, and there was no profit under the sun," (Eccl. 2:11). Later in the same book of Ecclesiastes Solomon gave his own conclusion concerning life, "This is the end of the matter; all hath been heard: Fear God, and keep his commandments; for this is the whole duty of man." (Eccl. 12:13).

Further evidence that happiness comes not from the avenues through which the world seeks it, but from a different source is found in the life of the apostle Paul. From a Roman prison, where he had none of the things just mentioned, he could write, "Rejoice in the Lord always: again I will say, Rejoice." (Phil. 4:4). In the face of warnings that he was in danger, this same apostle once said, "And now, behold, I go bound in the spirit unto Jerusalem, not knowing the things that shall befall me there: save that the Holy Spirit testifieth unto me in every city, saying that bonds and afflictions abide me. But I hold not my life of any account as dear unto myself, so that I may accomplish my course, and the ministry which I received from the Lord Jesus, to testify the gospel of the grace of God." (Acts 20:22-24). Even though he suffered great persecution, he had an inner joy that gave him strength and power.

James wrote, "Count it all joy, my brethren, when ye fall into manifold temptations; knowing that the proving of your faith worketh patience. And let patience have its perfect work, that ye may be perfect and entire, lacking in nothing." (James 1:2-4). To these we would add the words found in the Hebrew letter concerning Christ, "who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising shame, and hath sat down at the right hand of the throne of God." (Heb. 12:2).

### Pleasure or Happiness

Many people fail to distinguish between pleasure and happiness. There is a vast difference. There is a passage in the famous eleventh chapter of Hebrews which begins, "By faith Moses, when he was grown up, refused to be called the son of Pharaoh's daughter; choosing rather to share ill treatment with the people of God, than to enjoy the pleasures of sin for a season ..." (Heb. 11:24-25). It would be unrealistic to deny that sin often brings pleasure. There are many activities, some wholesome and fine, and some degrading and sinful, which give pleasure. This is a momentary kind of enjoyment, however, that is far different from the deep, lasting kind of enjoyment that happiness brings. No one would deny that the satisfaction of the physical drives which a normal person has brings pleasure, yet this unrestrained, self-indulgent kind of life does not lead to happiness.

On the other hand, happiness has an inner, spiritual element that is central. There is a deeper, longer-lasting quality about happiness. It brings peace of mind, satisfaction and fulfillment. This full, permanent kind of happiness is found most completely when one is in Christ and is following Christ's way of life.

### The Best Way

Some years ago Burton Coffman, long time minister of the Manhattan church in New York, published a book in which he had a sermon entitled, "Christ And Man's Happiness." He began this excellent message with the text, "I came that they may have life, and have it more abundantly." (John 10:10). His thesis in the sermon was that the Christian life is the only kind of life that will really work. Christ's way is the best way.

In support of this idea, I think we might point out that specialists in every walk of life testify that the Christian thing to do is always the best thing to do from the standpoint of sense and reason. For example, take the field of medicine, which endeavors to preserve physical health. The American Medical Association publishes a non-technical journal, *Today's Health*, which gives practical guidelines to help us remain healthy. One spokesman for this highly regarded group of medical men recently estimated that at least fifty percent of the ills of the race are due to what has traditionally been classified as immorality and wickedness in the hearts and lives of men.

Think, for a moment, of how true it is that much of man's suffering does come from his own indulgences. The drinking of liquor obviously has led to the destruction of many a life, even including vast numbers who are killed on the public highways. The misuse of drugs likewise has brought physical deterioration and destruction to great numbers of people. The more common overindulgence in food has also taken its toll, bringing on a wide variety of ills. Over indulgence in work or play, also may bring on harmful effects. Dr. S. I. McMillen in his excellent book, *None of These Diseases*, presents a staggering amount of evidence to show that the Christian way of life is physically the best way of life. In short, the moral thing to do is always the best thing to do physically.

Taking an entirely different field, let us look at business or economics. Fair, honest treatment means a healthy business venture. When a firm produces a useful product, prices it at a reasonable level, and advertises it truthfully, it can expect to be successful. When we render a service to our fellowmen at a reasonable cost, we can expect repeat customers and a permanently successful business. As a case in point, some years ago I remember visiting on several occasions Clifton's Cafeteria in downtown Los Angeles. The food was excellent, the surroundings very attractive, and the prices modest. On the back of each ticket was printed the words, "This is merely our estimate of the value of the food and service which you have received. Pay nothing unless delighted." The result was that people gladly paid the charges and returned often. I inquired and found that they were serving at that time approximately 31,000--meals per day, and were pricing their food in such a manner as to make one cent of profit on each customer. Such a firm not only was successful, but deserved to be successful.

In the realm of human relations, the Lord's teachings are the ultimate. No one has improved upon his formula as stated in Matthew 7:12, "All things therefore ye would that men should do unto you, even so do ye also unto them: for this is the law and the prophets." This is the best advice for family relationships, for business relationships, and for all other human relationships. John Hay, a prominent statesman of the past, once said, "After studying all the ways for nations to get along with one another, I find that it is all summed up in one word, 'Love thy neighbor as thyself!'"

Some years ago E. Stanley Jones spoke of the four absolutes of the Oxford Movement: absolute honesty, absolute purity, absolute love, and absolute unselfishness. Then, he mentioned the utter impossibility of their opposites: absolute dishonesty, absolute impurity, absolute hatred, and absolute selfishness. If one should try to live for a single week upon the premise of total evil, he would be wretched and would likely not live through the week. Incidentally, it is interesting to note that the word E V I L is the word L I V E spelled backwards. Perhaps it right he suggested that evil is just the opposite of the way Christ has guided his disciples to live.

#### Man's Problems--Christ's Answers

There are five areas in which man fails to find happiness. These are areas in which he faces special, insurmountable problems and they are also areas in which Christ has answers. These are areas in which happiness is either won or lost, depending upon how one responds to Christ's principles of help.

First, for many life lacks purpose and meaning. When God and religion are abandoned, as has been done down through the centuries and is being done by a great many people today, man finds that his skepticism, doubt and atheism lead nowhere. As a result of this aimlessness of life man becomes jumpy, jittery, and even frenetic. There is an emptiness about life which leads to escapism in the drinking of intoxicants, the harmful use of drugs, and the ceaseless search for pleasure. Just here I think it not out of place to observe that man finds it impossible really to run away from God. Remember the words of the psalmist,

Whither shall I go from thy Spirit?  
Or whither shall I flee from thy presence?  
If I ascend up into heaven, thou art there:  
If I make my bed in Sheol, behold, thou art there.  
If I take the wings of the morning,  
And dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea;  
Even there shall thy hand lead me,  
And thy right hand shall hold me.  
If I say, Surely the darkness shall overwhelm me,  
And the light about me shall be night;  
Even the darkness hideth not from thee,  
But the night shineth as the day:  
The darkness and the light are both alike to thee. (Ps. 1-39:7-12).

Christ provides purpose and destination for life. In the swirl of modern aimlessness, Christ can provide the meaning which can give life significance.

Dr. Henry C. Link, the world-famous psychiatrist who wrote *The Return To Religion*, said, "Nearly all of the people past thirty-five years of age who come to me with their problems do so because they have lost their faith. Getting well is generally only a matter of restoring faith."

The second area in which man fails to find happiness is a result of his own self-centeredness. There are no happy self-centered people. This destroys human personality. Dr. Alfred Adler has stated, "All the ills of human personality can be traced back to a failure to realize that 'it is more blessed to give than to receive.'" It was not by accident that Jesus said to his disciples, "If any man would come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow me. For whosoever would save his life shall lose it: and whosoever shall lose life for my sake shall find it." (Matt. 16:24-25). The denial of self in favor of something more important than self is an essential if one is to be happy. The modern self-indulgent, permissive attitude often results in license and anarchy. It results also in unhappiness.

A third area found in the negative feelings toward one's fellowman are a sure guarantee that one cannot himself be happy. They tear a person to pieces inside. Last summer my family and I, while on vacation, visited Mackinac Island at the narrows of Lake Huron in upper Michigan. While on the island we went through the old French fort, and there learned with great interest the story of a soldier who had been wounded in an unusual way many years ago. His wound resulted in an open hole in his stomach. The doctor at the fort gained much valuable information from his observation of this unusual case. He noted, through the open hole in the man's stomach, that if the man became angry, his stomach would not function properly. The color changed, the digestive fluids were cut off and the man could not digest his food while under the emotion of anger. When the man forgot his anger and thought of pleasant things, the stomach would resume its normal pink color and the digestive apparatus again would function normally. Not only man's stomach, but all of man's body functions properly, only when the emotional attitudes are right. Again Christ's directions are helpful, "Ye have heard that it was said, Thou shalt love thy neighbor and hate thy enemy: but I say unto you, Love your enemies, and pray for them that persecute you ..." (Matt. 5:43-44).

Yet another way in which man's happiness slips away is through feelings of fear and anxiety. Christ once said, "Sufficient unto the day is the evil thereof." (Matt. 6:34). He was saying in effect, don't worry about yesterday or tomorrow, be concerned only with today. To this Paul added, "In nothing be anxious; but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known unto God. And the peace of God, which passeth all understanding, shall guard your hearts and your thoughts in Christ Jesus." (Phil. 4:6-7). This lack of anxiety and fear is made possible by the promise which the apostle Paul included in his Roman letter, "And we know that to them that love God, all things work together for good, even to them that are called according to his purpose." (Rom. 8:28). How much better it is to have this peace of mind and confidence in the Lord than to fret and worry throughout one's life.

Finally there is the area of man's guilt. Man's conscience plagues him when he has violated what he knows to be right. Millions of people go bowed down all their lives through feelings of guilt about the misdeeds of their earlier years. How much better it would be to come to Christ and let him lift the burden of guilt through forgiveness. Only the forgiveness which Christ offers can remove this burden. In all these areas in which man is likely to be unhappy, Christ has the answer to man's problems.

### Conclusion

If man would be happy, there is no alternative to Christ's way of life. Jesus himself said, "I am the way and the truth and the life." (John 14:6). He who had a part in the creation of the universe and of man himself knows how to guide man away from the danger spots in life and toward the happy experiences that God intended for man. If we will only follow him, heed his admonitions, and strive to be like him, our lives will be eminently happy.