Getting Your Thoughts Right

Philippians 4:8-9 September 8, 2019
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If you're happy and you know it clap your hands. Are you happy? On a scale of 1-10 how happy would you say you are at this point in your life? What strategies are you employing to increase your happiness and overall sense of wellbeing? Today we are launching our sermon series about how our faith helps us deal with the things that can get in the way of our happiness. We'll offer practical applications to important issues such as how to silence your inner critic; what to do about anger; finding a sense of purpose and how to find awe in every step. Today we'll focus on the importance of setting right mental framework is a way to increase happiness.

Happiness means something different to different people. We all go through phases where we attempt to "find" happiness through something outside of us, like material possessions, or a new job, or finding or dumping a significant other. In the end, though, even if we attain them, these things don't necessarily increase happiness. We've all known people who have accomplished a great deal and seem to have everything going their way but they are miserable. Maybe you, like me have been on mission trips around the world and seen some of the poorest of the poor in Haiti, Central America, Kenya. And so many of them despite living in desperate poverty and unfortunate circumstances are absolutely happy.

If you truly want happiness let go of the notion that some thing you are waiting for is going to make you happy. Not a raise, not retirement, not when someone else gets his act together. There is no thing that is going to make you happy. What makes you happy? Nothing. No thing from the outside is going to make you happy. It's got to come from the inside.

The Science of Happiness

A lot of research has been poured into the science of happiness in the last twenty years. Neuroscientists are proving what we know instinctually. If we focus our thoughts in a positive direction we can actually feel a greater sense of happiness and wellbeing. Berkley has the Science of Happiness project that highlights what science is saying about how we can increase our sense of happiness. One of their main premises is expressed this way:

> *There's this assumption that happiness happens to us. That it's dependent upon external factors like the quality of our childhood, the quality of our work life, our marriage all of which are important. But in fact what the science is showing us is that happiness is a skill that you can work on, that you can generate just the way you work on your bicep in the gym. We spend so much time on our bodies, on our stock portfolios, on our cars, and on our whatever and almost no time on the one filter through which we experience everything and that's our minds. And so the idea that the mind is trainable that these qualities that we want—happiness, calm, peace, generosity, compassion, patience—that these aren't factory settings that can't be tinkered with that these are actually skills that can be developed.*

Cognitive neuroscientist Dr. Caroline Leaf demonstrates that the way you think changes the brain. Our brain health can improve or get worse depending on the patterns of our thoughts. Negative thoughts are toxic. She advocates detoxifying your mind.

Think about What is Worthy of Praise

The science underscores what faith has taught that all along. In our scripture Paul emphasized getting your thoughts focused on the positive. He was a guy who had every right to complain, to turn negative. He was imprisoned in a dungeon when he wrote these words, so they don't come lightly or without knowing what it's like to suffer.

> *Finally, beloved, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things. Keep on doing the things that you have learned and received and heard and seen in me, and the God of peace will be with you.*

Right thoughts lead to inner peace, God's peace, the peace that surpasses all understanding. Happy people have a sense of inner peace. We get a chance every week in worship to think positive, to begin your week right. We don't ignore our pain and hardships. They are real. But in faith we know God wins. We come to worship and are called to remember what we have to be grateful for—that we are not left adrift on our own. It's a great detox.

Jesus talked about letting go of our anxiety by considering the birds of the air and how they don't worry and get all anxious but have a sense of trust in God.

Think about how to reverse your worry, turn it into a positive. That it, our worries can indicate where we need to take care of our spiritual lives. Do we trust God; do we trust that no matter what may happen God will help us get through it? Jesus teaches us not to be so preoccupied with our normal daily worries that we miss the beauty and the wonderful things that God is constantly pouring into our lives. Jesus shows us how to refocus our worry and turn it into reassurance about things that ultimately matter—you know--kindness, grace, justice, and compassion.

Be Transformed rather than Conformed

Observe your thoughts and remember what it says in Romans, *be not conformed to the patterns of this world*..the patterns of the world suggest that you are not desirable and no one will ever want you. The gospel refutes that and affirms your dignity, your worth.

Paul says be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Don't compare yourself with someone else's lifestyle and activities. You don't see the whole picture. Social media leads to depression if you are thinking about how much better everyone else's life is compared to yours. "Oh, I see Sue and Jim are taking another trip after they go to the award ceremony for being top performers in their companies. They just post an image of what they want you to see, and it may not at all be indicative of what is really going on inside of them. When you sense that you are caught up in

conformist thinking just remember God created you as a unique person and has blessings carved out just for you and they will be sufficient.

Avoid All-or Nothing Thinking

Treat events as they are: single events. If you fail at something, so what? Resist the tendency to think, *I fail at everything*. Some people burn the carrots and say, "The whole dinner is ruined." They say things like, "I never do anything right. I'm just a screw-up." All or nothing thinking and happiness rarely co-exist in the same head.

Sometimes it is a moral standard you fall short in. You sin, you blow it big time. If you fall short of a moral standard, don't make yourself out to be "all bad." Social scientist Benee Brown talks about the difference between guilt and shame. Guilt is the regret you have from doing something bad. Shame says not what I did was bad, but I'm bad. The gospel of forgiveness that Jesus proclaimed isn't about shame. You are God's beloved. When you make a mistake, accept God's forgiveness, learn about yourself and move on. Get rid of that perfectionist mentality and join the rest of the human race that didn't think you were that perfect to begin with. Stop wasting energy in shame and excuses and invest it in moving toward your full potential.

Watch Negative Thoughts. Negative thoughts have power. Everyone has them, but happy people let them fly by like a bird instead of catching them and inviting them to move into their heads and build nests. Unhappy people attach to negative thoughts and treat them as if they are reality. They allow those thoughts to dictate their actions. But remember they are only thoughts.

Someone told me we have about 80,000 thoughts an hour and you can't remember the last three you had. Sometimes we attach to a thought and give it power but forget that we made up that thought. The person who gave you a dirty look may have had a tummy ache, but you assumed it was about you. The guy tailgating you in traffic may have just lost someone they love. Maybe someone had 90 emails to open one day and wanted to think about what to say to you but then simply forgot, it wasn't an intentional act to dis you. Don't give power to thoughts that may not have anything to do with reality.

Refute negative thinking with God's truth—you will be given all you need, God will be with you, there are people around you who care and pray the very best for you. But this isn't just about replacing sad thoughts with happy thoughts. It's about recognizing even the bad feelings, feeling them and moving on. Every emotion wants to move through you. They have a purpose and a life span. Where we get into trouble is when we deny painful emotions. We worry that if we feel an emotion we will get stuck.

Avoid Catastrophic thinking

If I don't get this job, my life will be ruined. If he doesn't like me, I will never find a spouse...catastrophic thinking is seeing something as horrible when it does not have to be seen that way. Most of the time, catastrophes are only catastrophes in our heads. They make risks almost impossible. While there certainly are terrible occurrences in life, in God's grace there is always redemption and a future. When the worst that can happen, happens, God's grace is there

still. Maybe especially there. There are always lessons we can learn that help us grow and be better people. Remember that we are resurrection people.

Do not Overgeneralize from One Instance to All.
One bad relationship--all men are like that. It closes you off from the goodness God has for you. God has a good gift for you. I first became aware that people do this when I went to a girlfriend's house for dinner. Her mother asked if I would like corn or peas. I said corn. From then on, every time I came over she made corn because as she put it, "I know you don't like peas." Sometimes it is good to evaluate if you are trying hard, wow. It's easy to do that. We have a bad experience. We make a risk, we get burned. I'm glad I didn't give up on dating just because that girlfriend two-timed me.

See Both Sides
Jesus said we'd have problems, so we shouldn't' be surprised by them. But unhappy folks tend to block out positives and see only negative about themselves and experiences.

Have some perspective. Some folks cannot enjoy anything that is less than perfect. Happy people are happy even when there are flaws, missteps, and mistakes. The party can still be a huge success even if the cake flopped. The school can still be wonderful for their children even if they don't like the teacher or soccer coach.

These are all simple exercises and things we can rely on for faith. Remove the obstacles to your happiness. So the next time someone asks if you are happy and you know it, you'll know just what to do.