

The Bible Doesn't Say That: God Wants You to Be Happy Matt.12:46-50 Romans 12:1-2

Romans 12:1-2

I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. ²Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect.

This is the word of the Lord!

As we continue in our series, “The Bible doesn’t say that,” we come to a phase that we might know isn’t actually in the Bible, literally, yet *is* a common belief, however, in some Christian circles and in parts of our wider culture. And that is the phrase, or the belief, that God wants you to be happy, above all else.

Just tune into a prosperity gospel preacher on tv or radio and that’s the underlying theology and message of their preaching. I remember tuning into a local prosperity gospel preacher a few years ago, out of curiosity, and the first words out of his mouth were, “God wants you to drive a Mercedes Benz!” I thought, great! That would put the Ford dealers out of business, but I guess they’ll be driving Mercedes’ so it’s prob ok. But the preacher’s underlying message was, God wants you to be happy, and clearly prosperity makes a person happy—in that preacher’s mind, at least. And he plucked a lot of passages from

Scripture out of context to make his case. Not to mention that the idea of prosperity, Biblically speaking, doesn't necessarily mean only wealth and possessions. Other things, like having friendships, family, health, a sense of community and belonging, are also seen as elements that contribute to us prospering.

Prosperity gospel aside, this belief that God wants you to be happy is a common misconception in American culture, and it had its start with the influence of folks like Norman Vincent Peale at the turn of the last century (early 1900's). Before that, there was a strict Calvinism at work in our culture which had a powerful effect on the understanding of gospel in the 18th century (and still does, today in some quarters)—namely, that we're all miserable sinners in danger of the fires of hell, and we need to crawl on our hands and knees up to the altar of God to be saved. This was theology at work in Jonathan Edwards' famous sermon in the mid 1700's titled "Sinners in the hands of an angry God." The image he worked with: God is dangling you, by a thread, over the fiery abyss of hell, and if you don't straighten out your life and turn to God, he might just drop you into the abyss. Jonathan Edwards was a Presbyterian minister by the way, and he was influential in the first great awakening in America in the 1730's and 40's.

So, what we have inherited today are two streams of thinking and theology—one that says, “God is displeased with you because you’re a sinner and if you don’t turn your life over to Jesus Christ you’re in deep doo doo,” and another that says, “God wants you to be happy and prosperous, and the gospel will show you how to achieve that prosperity.” And the Bible then becomes a kind of how-to manual for achieving personal success and happiness. Or, the Bible becomes an eternal fire insurance policy.

The prosperity stream, or the God-wants-you-to-be-happy stream is probably a reaction to the first stream of Calvinist doom theology. The pendulum swung pretty far the other direction in response! Both streams are a misuse of the Bible and of the Biblical witness.

Now, before I get into this morning’s topic let me be quick to say: because the Bible doesn’t say or teach “God wants you to be happy” that doesn’t mean that the opposite is true: God wants you to be *unhappy*! Please don’t go home and tell people that the preacher said that God doesn’t want you to be happy. No! By all means, be happy! Go for it! God is not displeased if we are happy. God rejoices with us when we’re happy (just like God weeps with us when we weep). I like being happy and I have had a sign in my office that says “It’s a good

day to have a good day.” So, by all means be happy. What the Bible is saying is, happiness isn’t one of God’s primary goals for you and me.

Interesting: there are only a few verses in the Old Testament that use the word “happy” to describe a person of faith. And those verses are found largely in what is called the wisdom literature of the Bible; namely, the Psalms, the book of Proverbs, and in Ecclesiastes, in which Solomon is trying to figure out all of the great mysteries of life—which, of course, he can’t—so he basically throws up his arms and says, “Vanity of vanities, all is vanity.” At the end of that first chapter he says, “...all is vanity, and a chasing after the wind.”

That’s how the book of Ecclesiastes begins. It’s a somewhat cynical look at life, where Solomon’s understanding of life, and of the world, and of God is: “We have no idea what’s going on, we can’t figure it out from beginning to end, we don’t really know what God is up to, so what the heck: eat, drink and be merry. You may as well; this must be what God wants for you, because when all is said and done, we’re not really sure what God wants.”

While there is some excellent wisdom in the book of Ecclesiastes—there are some gems in that book, and I love how Solomon wrestles with some of life’s hard questions—yet there are also some warning signs. Like I mentioned about

Job last week, there are places where we see a good example of a bad example.

How *not* to think about life, and God, or ourselves.

That's a long way of saying, the word "happy" occurs infrequently in the Old Testament, and when it does occur it's used in a way that sometimes suggests it's a pursuit a person engages in when all else fails. When all else fails, I'll just indulge myself.

Here is what's fascinating: when we get to the New Testament, the word "happy" isn't to be found. It's conspicuously absent. There are a couple of words that come close to it; like the Greek word 'makarios', which means "blessed," but a couple versions of the Bible translate that word as "happy." For example, in the Good News Bible it translates the beatitudes as, "Happy are the poor in spirit; happy are those who mourn" and so forth; which is misleading because 'makarios' is a blessing word. It's probably the translator's attempt at making the New Testament less difficult to read I suppose, or a little more uplifting, but the word doesn't really mean 'happy' as much as it means "God's favor is upon." I wouldn't say that people who are mourning are happy. By definition, they aren't happy, but Jesus says they are blessed because God's attention is on them, to comfort them in their grief.

Anyway, the words that were commonly used 2,000 years ago in Greek and Roman society that mean “happy” aren’t used in the New Testament.

Yet, many people believe that “God just wants you to be happy” comes from the Bible, or that it’s a Biblical principle. Perhaps, again, because it’s a reaction against the hellfire and brimstone God that gets preached by hell enthusiasts—you know, people who are just a little too excited about the idea of hell. So some folks overreact and say, “I don’t believe in that God” and then believe in a God who only wants happiness instead.

More likely, though, people believe the Bible teaches God just wants you to be happy because there *is* extensive teaching in the Bible conveying that God wants us to be well, and whole, and forgiven, and joyful, and loved, so the assumption is that it all means that God wants us to be happy. That’s misleading, though, and it can lead down a road of harmful beliefs. If we follow the logic, “God wants me to be happy” can mean:

Whatever makes me happy must be right and good, and whatever makes me unhappy must be wrong or bad. And then we may start to believe that discomfort, delay, risk, struggle and inconveniences can’t possibly be in the realm of God’s will, or of God working in my life, and whatever makes me happy must be God’s will and God at work in my life.

Then without knowing it, a person can begin to worship the false gods of money, comfort, pleasure and all that. It happens very subtly. Herein lies the problem: if we believe that above all else God wants us to be happy, we are practically forced to believe that God exists to serve us. This week I was thinking of an old illustration I used with Jr. & Sr. high students: God as being like a cosmic vending machine. Where you put in your coins (i.e., say your prayers, promise to be good, do your good deeds, etc) and then God will give you what you want and you'll be pleased.

If we hold the belief that God exists to serve us/make us happy (a cosmic vending machine), then a relationship with God becomes transactional, rather than relational. Prayer becomes transactional rather than relational, and so forth.

The tragedy of this misbelief is that if we believe that God exists to make us happy (serve us), then if I'm *not* happy or things aren't going my way I have to believe that either (a) God has failed and isn't doing his job; or (b) something is seriously wrong with me; or (c) God doesn't care about me and prefers to make other people happy. And then every time I see someone driving a Mercedes Benz it means that God cares about them and has made them happy but not me.

Let me say it again, lest I bring on multiple cases of depression by saying "God wants you to be happy," isn't a Biblical idea... let me say again that I believe

God delights *in us* and *with us* when we're happy. Just like any of us smile when others are happy, and when we enjoy making others happy. But making others happy is not our highest priority, just as it isn't God's highest priority for humanity.

Because happiness is short-term, and is based on feeling and circumstance. The word "happy" contains the root "hap" (duh) which means "fleeting" or "temporary." So we get words like "*happenstance*" and phrases like "it just so *'happened*" which suggests that something came and went, which is what happiness does; it comes and goes. And it's passive: something *happens* to us.

Don't get me wrong, happiness—when it comes—is great; who doesn't like to feel happy? It just isn't wise to build the house of our life upon it, or expect God to provide it for us as part of God's job description.

Contrast this with joy, a word that *is* all over the Bible, which is something we choose no matter what's going on in our lives, or in the world. Joy comes from knowing, and trusting, that God is with us, and that we are loved unconditionally by the creator of the universe. Joy is a bigger-picture thing, not fleeting or passive or dependent upon circumstances that come and go. And it isn't a feeling, necessarily. Joy is much deeper, and lasting, and something that grows in us over time, because it's a fruit of the Spirit, which means that over

time a deep well of joy fills us, and we can go to that well again and again and the Spirit of God will resupply our well.

The Declaration of independence talks about these unalienable rights of life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. Life... yes! Liberty... absolutely! Pursuit of happiness... Well, good luck with that. I'm not so sure about that one. We are indeed free to pursue it. But it's like a dog chasing its tail. Occasionally it gets it, but most of the time it just goes round and round in circles. I don't think God wants us to pursue happiness as much as God wants us to pursue knowing and loving God. Just as God pursues us and wants to know and love us.

So let's talk about that, for a moment. If the Bible doesn't say, "God wants you to be happy," what does the Bible say? What *does* God want for us?

A lot could be said here, but I'm going to focus on one of the golden threads that is woven throughout the Bible from beginning to end: pursuing and doing God's will. Pursuing and doing God's will.

There are a lot of verbs that could be used here when it comes to a human response to the will of God: *knowing* God's will, *discerning* God's will (as in Rom.12, which is another word for 'figuring out' or 'searching for'), *obeying* God's will, *delighting* in God's will (David uses that one in psalms frequently, "I delight to do your will, O God"), and just "*do*"—like in the Lord's prayer, "Your will be *done*."

And also in our reading from Matt 12, where Jesus says that “those who *do* the will of my father are my spiritual siblings.”

The word I like to use, which I think pulls this all together, is “willingness.” Because it’s a relational word and not a transactional word. It suggests a choice we make, in agreement with what God desires. It isn’t a force of will, or strict obedience, or a contract. It’s a willing of our will to be in alignment with God’s will. And, it’s mutual. In the garden of Eden there was mutual willingness: God invited Adam and Eve to live into the goodness of God’s creative design, and God was willing to give Adam and Eve free will in stewarding the earth, naming the animals, and so forth. And... in allowing them to make a *bad* choice when it came to whose will would be followed (theirs, or God’s). Yet even after making a bad choice, God continued to pursue them. And God keeps on inviting his people to pursue him. That’s the story of the entire Bible, if we could summarize it in one sentence: God’s faithful, relentless pursuit of people. And the invitation to respond to that pursuit.

So instead of “God wants you to be happy” the Bible consistently says, “God wants you to be willing to follow God’s will.” To be aligned with God, and integrated, with God. Chances are, there will be a fair amount of happiness as we do that, and certainly joy, because God’s will is good (to use Paul’s language).

How do we know God's will? How do we learn it, discern it, figure it out, in order to follow it?

In Romans 12 Paul gets at it this way: offer our bodies as a living sacrifice, which leads to being transformed and renewed, which leads to being able to discern God's will.

Paul, who always seems to choose his words very carefully, says offer your "bodies..." He doesn't say "offer your *souls*" or "offer your *minds*" or even "offer your hearts" which we often think is what we are supposed to offer. We often hear the phrase "give your heart to the Lord" which is a good phrase. But here, Paul says, "Offer your *bodies*."

And I believe he uses that earthy word 'body' because he knows that where our body goes, all of us goes. We are encouraged to offer all of ourselves, earthy, real, bodily you, with all of the good and the bad, the strengths and the struggles. It's a way of saying "offer your whole self" and when you do that, there follows your mind, your heart, your will, and then God's will becomes easier to discern.

Think about it, at the table we celebrate that Jesus offered his body... all of himself. He didn't offer his love, or well-wishes, or his prayers, or his good advice, but himself, bodily. He became willing to align with God's will for his life, even if that willingness led him to a place where he prayed, *in anguish*, "Not my will, but

yours be done.” We can be grateful that Jesus knew that happiness was not a goal for his life! But willingness.

Prayer by Thomas Merton... Notice the language here: desire, leading, trust, of willing to be willing. It summarizes our reading from Rom.12 beautifully.

My Lord God, I have no idea where I am going.
I cannot see the road ahead of me.
I cannot know for certain where it will end.
Nor do I really know myself,
and the fact that I think I am following your will
does not mean that I am actually doing so.
But, I believe that the desire to please you
does in fact please you.
And I hope I have that desire
in all that I am doing.
I hope that I will never do anything
apart from that desire.
And I know that if I do this
you will lead me by the right road,
though I may know nothing about it.
Therefore I will trust you always
though I may seem to be lost and
in the shadow of death.
I will not fear, for you are ever with me
and you will never leave me
to face my perils alone.

Take My Life and Let It Be