

The Pursuit Of Happiness?

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Preacher: Rev. Gordon Martin

[0 : 00] Well, please turn again with me to the book of Psalms and to Psalm 1. Blessed is the man who walks not in the council of the wicked, nor stands in the way of sinners, nor sits in the seat of scoffers, but his delight is in the law of the Lord, and on his law he meditates day and night and so on.

I wonder do you have a motto for life? And I suppose most of us know what a motto is. In some ways a motto is a rule of thumb.

It's something that is there guiding us and leading us, whether we realize it or not. In some ways a motto is like a vision.

Some people's vision for life is quite straightforward. One person said to me recently, all I want to be is to be happy.

And I want my family to be happy. And I want others around about me to be happy. Now, when I was younger I might have riled against that and said, well that's pretty inadequate for a motto for life.

[1 : 10] But now as I'm older I tend to think, no, I understand where that person is coming from and there are good reasons perhaps for wanting to be happy.

The US Declaration of Independence gave these particular endowments. It said that man, woman, people were endowed by their creator with certain inalienable rights among these life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.

The pursuit of happiness. The Bible has much to say actually on happiness. Ecclesiastes, if you go there you will find there that the writer, Solomon I believe, just exploring what life is all about and telling us at times you know you can't do anything better than to eat and drink and be joyful.

Sam One is speaking about blessed as the man. Blessed means happy. And sometimes we complicate it and we say well it's joyful, it's not just this basic happiness that everybody else is speaking about.

Nevertheless it is about happiness. That's what blessedness means. When Jesus preached the Sermon on the Mount it was all about at the beginning, blessedness, happiness.

[2 : 34] Blessed are the poor in spirit and so on. Blessed, blessed, blessed, blessed. So the pursuit of happiness if you like is not a criminal thing.

The problem is how to be happy. How to be happy. I do not know, psychologists get paid big bucks for bringing answers to that question and I am not going to complicate the sermon by going into these things.

But you know in some ways there are two extremes in the pursuit of happiness with regard to what the Bible teaches. And they are both captured for us in Luke chapter 15 in the story that Jesus tells about the prodigal son and the context of that story.

You know most of you will know the story of the prodigal, a father has two sons and the younger one says to his father, father give me the inheritance that I am going to receive when you die give it to me now and then he gets it which is a kind of unusual cultural phenomenon but he gets his inheritance and he goes off and he lives a life of wine, woman and song.

He squanders his wealth until eventually of course the highs turn to the lows and he is found in a field caring for pigs, something Jews would not be normally associated with and he is wishing that he could eat the food that the pigs had to eat.

[4 : 09] All his money is gone and of course all his friends have gone. So that did not work. Okay the extreme which people go for is you know eat, drink and be merry for tomorrow you die but it does not work and the prodigal son's story is showing that.

But there is also in that chapter the other extreme and surprisingly the other extreme is actually religion, religious people, devout people, pious people.

These are the people that the story has been written about or been told for because the Pharisees where the religious, they weren't religious leaders of the day but they were a kind of moral reform group, they studied the Bible, they took the Bible, they wanted people to live according to the Bible because they believed that if they lived according to the Bible God would bless them and God would bless the nation.

And so they went in for religion and they appeared very serious, very profound but also as you read the Bible very kind of poh-faced and serious and made people miserable.

The other problem is this for the Pharisees, despite all the religion, despite all their biblical interest they end up being some of the worst people on the planet because they are actually scoffers.

[5 : 48] When Jesus comes amongst them, when Jesus does his miracles, when Jesus receives poor people, receives the tax collectors, the sinners, those who had really fallen out of society religiously, when Jesus receives them they mock and they scoff and they mutter against him and they said, who is this that receives sinners?

Why does Jesus eat and drink with sinners? Why does Jesus welcome sinners and muttering under their breath, they find themselves among the very worst of people described here in Psalm 1, they are in the seat of the scoffers.

One chapter, two extremes. You might not think of yourself as being in either extreme camp but somewhere along the way you are going to be in the spectrum and you are going to tend one way or tend to another way but both ways are ways that fail.

Don't lead to happiness, they don't lead to the blessedness of the man in Psalm 1 and we are going to look now at Psalm 1 with that kind of thinking in our background.

The first thing I want to say is this, the blessed man and can I say, blessed person, blessed woman, it's not sexist language, it's just the language that's there, the blessed person is blessed before he reads the Psalm.

[7 : 26] He's blessed before he reads the Psalm. Now what do I mean by that? The Psalm 1 isn't a manual really on how to be happy.

There's a danger I think of reading that Psalm and thinking, okay I want to be happy, here's what I'll do and here's what I'll not do.

Reading the Psalm that way leads you into all kinds of difficulties. It ignores the rest of the Bible and that's in a sense where the Pharisees went wrong.

They thought, well we won't walk in the council of the wicked, we won't stand the way of sinners, we won't sit in the seat of scoffers, we'll delight in the law of the Lord, we'll meditate in the law of the Lord all day long and so on.

They turned it into a rule of kind of working but of course they failed. What's the wider context?

[8 : 27] Well in Psalm 1 the blessed man is also the righteous man. Verse 6, the Lord knows the way of the righteous. The blessed man, the happy man is the righteous man.

What does the rest of scripture teach us about righteousness? Who are the righteous people? Well go into the New Testament to very familiar language and you'll find Paul there telling us that righteousness comes through faith in Jesus Christ.

Righteousness comes through belief, through faith. We could go to Romans 3 but let me go to Romans 4 instead where Paul is explaining the importance of that and in verse 3 he quotes the Old Testament.

What does the scripture say? Abraham believed God and it was counted to him as righteousness. Abraham was righteous not because he was a great guy doing great things.

He was righteous, he was accounted righteous, he was declared righteous by God because he believed and trusted God. Later on he speaks about, he's quoting David, he says from Psalm 32, blessed are those whose lawless deeds are forgiven, whose sins are covered.

[9 : 44] The happy man, the blessed man is a person whose sins are forgiven, whose sins are covered. That's really crucial when you come to read this Psalm because I would say if you are looking for happiness what is the Bible saying?

If you would be happy, the first thing I have to say to you is you need to trust the Lord. That's the source of blessing and the person who is blessed is blessed before he reads this Psalm.

He's blessed because he's a believer, he's blessed because he trusts God, he's blessed in New Testament terms because he trusts the Lord Jesus Christ.

It's not by performance, it's not by doing, doing, doing or avoiding, avoiding, avoiding. But the Psalm reflects two types of people.

It reflects the righteous, it reflects the wicked, it reflects the believers, it reflects the unbelievers and the challenge of course comes to us.

[10:52] Who are we, what are we? Are we righteous or unrighteous? And then in a sense it says to those who are already righteous, would you continue to experience blessedness?

Would you continue to experience happiness? Then here is the code for the road. Here is the way that a blessed person conducts himself. Here is the way that a Christian conducts himself.

And as he lives this way, he will go on prospering spiritually. He will enjoy the presence of God and all the benefits that God has.

Remember that children's story of the one with the necklace of all good things that God has for his people? We have all these good things.

And ours, but sometimes if we are honest as Christians, we don't actually enjoy God's blessings.

And part of the reason is our failure to live in the way that we know we ought to live.

[12:04] Let's take a couple of, two or three points from this. How does the blessed person live? The happy person? Well, we're told first of all in verses one and two, he avoids evil.

That's why I would summarize these two verses or at least verse one. He walks not in the council of the wicked. He doesn't stand in the way of sinners.

He doesn't sit in the seat of scoffers. He makes wise choices about the company that he keeps.

He's careful if you like about his booze and buddies.

He's careful about his counselors, about those he's listening to. This is a man or woman who has discernment and is thinking carefully about where they take advice from.

He gravitates away from certain people and gravitates towards certain people. Now that becomes apparent to a person who has faith. I remember when I was young, I wasn't very sure if I was a Christian.

[13:09] I've gone through my teenage years. I believe I came to faith when I was about 11, looking back. But I wasn't sure about it. And all the way through high school, I was lacking assurance and concerned about who I was, what I was.

I used to read all these theology books and I thought, well, I'm not sure about my life. I'm not sure about the depth of my repentance, the depth of sorrow for sin in my life.

But as I grew up, one year I went to camp. This was a camp in Switzerland, a free church camp. But of course in a free church camp, you have all types of people.

You have kids from all kinds of backgrounds, church kids and non-church kids. But mostly it was church kids. But even amongst church kids, there are those who really love the Lord and there are those who are not too bothered about the Lord.

And I experienced something very interesting there. I should tell you, I went to a school with about 1200 pupils. I didn't know anybody else who went to church in that school.

[14:19] I mean, there was some, but I didn't know anybody. So there was very few Christian kids around. But I discovered something in my life, that camp. And that is this, that I gravitated towards those who patently love the Lord.

And kind of began just to avoid or dissociate myself from others. Not because I was very, very wise and so on.

I'm just saying, this is what happens. This is what happens. You look at the story of Nicodemus.

Nicodemus begins as a Pharisee, but you can see that there's a process going on where, although he still remains a Pharisee in terms of his situation, he's moving out.

He's moving away until at the end when Jesus is dead. He's with Joseph of Arimathea, taking care of the body of our Lord.

Blessed people think, act carefully. Not always righteous people make mistakes.

[15:35] Think about Lot. Lot is described as a righteous man in the Bible. I think it's Peter that says he was a righteous man.

Lot made serious mistakes. When he and Abraham were divvying up the land, as it were, when they realized that there are too many flocks for them all to be fed and pastured and nurtured on the same grass, they decided to go separate ways.

And Abraham said to Lot, you take whatever you want. You take whatever land you feel is best. And Lot were told, chose to go and camp near Sodom.

Sodom was already known in the scripture as a wicked city, a city where all sorts of arrogance existed.

We find Lot, first of all, near Sodom. Then we find him in Sodom. And then we find him in the gate of Sodom.

[16:39] He's gone the opposite way, hasn't he? And the Blessed Man doesn't walk in the council of the wicked, doesn't go along with them, certainly doesn't stop and stand and spend too much time with them, listening to their advice, doesn't sit in the seat of scoffers, doesn't end at that position where he is in the center of things.

But Lot went the opposite way. And Lot lived harassed and Lot lived grieving a lot of his life. And today we would call him a Christian.

He was a righteous man, but he made mistakes. And we can all do that. And sometimes, sometimes maybe we're just, we're just feel we're doing that too often.

Now this is not about rules of separation. This is not me saying, you know, avoid the, avoid people. I'm not saying that at all. I'm just saying, sometimes we have to be willing to say no.

Advice comes. Our colleagues tell us do this. People say, live like this. Go with us. Sometimes we just have to say, no, I cannot. It's not good for me.

[17:46] It's not healthy. And explain our position to people. We're avoiding evil. We're avoiding sin. We're avoiding that which will contradict our efforts to bring glory to God.

So he avoids evil. But secondly, he studies to do good. His delight verse two is in the law of the Lord and on his law he meditates day and night.

You might say of this blessed man, he's a man of another planet, a man of another world. He marches to the beat of a different drum. He finds his true pleasure elsewhere.

He takes counsel of you like from another place. Paul tells us in Colossians chapter three, set your minds on things above.

Set your minds on things above. Why? Because you're a citizen. You actually belong. If you're a Christian, if you're a believer, if you're a righteous person, by definition, you're a citizen of heaven. Who's in heaven?

[18:46] Christ. And you're listening to Christ. And you're thinking about the standards of Christ and the wishes of Christ and the wills of Christ.

Set your minds on things there in heaven and let the rules of heaven influence you on earth, the way you live and walk upon the earth. Specifically here it says, he delights, his delight is in the law of the Lord.

Does that not mean at the very minimal that such a person reads his Bible and studies it?

He meditates upon this word meditation, I guess is like sort of a cow chewing the cud. Just bringing the food back into the mind and masticating it, going over it, thinking about it, dwelling upon it, asking what does this mean?

I don't understand that. What does it mean? It's not about the legal stuff here, it's the license, the law of the Lord is not so much that. You can take it for the whole of the revelation of scripture.

[19:55] And there's so much in here that we don't understand. You'll be reading it for 70, 80, 90, 100 years, there will still be parts in this that you don't understand. So there's lots to meditate on, lots to think about.

I was told by a minister who was, I think in Nicholson Institute many, many years ago and he said that there was a preacher there, a late preacher, you will know him, I will not say his name.

But I believe he was a classic teacher, a Latin teacher, he had a very quaint voice, I'm told, but he said this in one of his prayers, I think pulpit prayers.

Lord, feed us with hunger. Feed us with hunger, which sounds contradictory, sounds quite weird, but it makes a lot of sense in the context of this passage.

We need the hunger. We need God to produce a hunger within us for his word, and that's what he meant, feed us with hunger, feed us with this desire to study the Bible.

[21:02] And you know, it's a desire, a prayer rather than God, I believe, answers. You pray that prayer and I believe he will answer it.

And let me remind you that studying the Bible is a delight, it's a book that keeps on giving, it's food that keeps on feeding and nourishing.

You know, sometimes I guess you are not able to do this on the island, maybe some of you, the minute you leave the island you say let's go to McDonald's or let's go to Burger King or KFC, some of the youngsters will want to go to these places anyway.

And I frequent or have frequent in the past these things quite a lot. But you know, after you've had a McDonald's or a Burger King or a KFC, you know, after a little while you're saying, especially as you get older, why did I eat that?

You know, why did I indulge that desire for a little bit of flavour? Because you leave the restaurant very often, you're kind of bloated, you don't know what's going on in your insides but you know that somewhere along the line that actually wasn't very good for you and you can't do it too often.

[22 : 16] The Bible's not like that, the Bible is always nourishing, it's always strengthening, it's a food that keeps on giving if you like, it will always delight.

But it's not just about studying, it's about in terms of reading and books and conversation. It's delighting to put the law of God into practice.

That's surely what it's about. And if we think of one person who was able to do that perfectly, it was Jesus Christ.

I mean this Sam, the blessed man, really and truly that the perfectly blessed, happy man is Jesus Christ.

Really studied the word but was truly active and perfectly righteous and full of love and full of compassion and full of doing on behalf of others, wasn't he?

[23 : 21] Read the Gospel of Mark and it's bang bang bang bang bang bang bang. He's doing, doing, doing, doing all the time, immediately and then, immediately and then. He's very, very, very busy.

He's putting the law of God which he learned and studied, remember, as a child is at the temple, 12 years old, he's asking the experts about the law of God, he's asking them questions.

But when we see him in his public ministry, he's teaching the word of God and he's putting that word of God into practice and Jesus was full of joy.

We sing a song, Man of Sorrows. Many sorrows came into his life but we shouldn't forget that he himself was full of joy.

You know, he rejoiced when little children heard the Gospel and understood the Gospel and he said, Father I praise you for revealing these things to little children.

[24 : 27] Now whether he meant young children or whether he meant people who were, you know, less academic and less intellectual and he was saying, you know, the lesser people as it were, I don't know, just all it was covered by the word children there.

But he rejoiced and in John 15, that passage about the vine and the spirit and the obedience, he says, I want you to share my joy.

That's what he wants all of us as Christians to be able to share his joy. And he links there, of course, faith and obedience and abiding in him.

A Christian is a happy person and we should be happy. You know, Lloyd-Jones used to say, you know, an unhappy Christian isn't really of much value.

You know, it's a bad witness, bad example, an unhappy Christian. We should be happy with the joy of Jesus Christ.

[25 : 40] So he avoids evil, he studies to the good and then thirdly, he is nourished by God. Verse three, he's like a tree planted by streams of water that yields its fruit in its season and its leaf does not wither.

In all that he does, he prospers. It's not, it's not getting strength from himself. He's getting nourishment and strength from deep rivers of God's provision.

You know, a Christian, a Christian life can baffle people. Don't know if you're a Christian today or not. But if you've lived in this community for any length of time and you've observed Christians, you will have seen Christians experience the same things that everybody else experiences, maybe sometimes even worse.

And they come through it. And they come through it reflecting joy. They come through it with a kind of awareness that serious things have happened to them, but also they seem to bounce back.

Where does their strength come from? Remember the story of, was it Spafford who, who, you know, sent his, he was an American businessman, if I remember rightly, and he, he sent his family home to, or back to, to Ireland or to the UK and they were lost at sea.

[27 : 21] They were lost at sea, the ship sank and later he came and he passed over the, the place where the ship had sank.

And out of his experience, he wrote, it is well with my soul. It is well with my soul.

How many people would be able to do that, to lose their family, pass the place where they die and say, I am at peace.

It is well, it is well with my soul. That doesn't come from human resource or human strength. That surely is God given strength and nourishment.

So would we be happy, trust in Jesus? Live the way the Bible wants us to live if already we've trusted. We avoid evil. We study to do good.

[28 : 21] We take strength from God. Let me close just by, by one word of contrast. There are others in the Psalm.

There are the wicked. And the problem with the wicked is this, really, the live lives of no lasting value.

It's like, and forgive me, I mean, I don't want to be offensive. But if we're not Christians, this Psalm, not me, this Psalm is saying, your life really is of no significance before God.

It's of no lasting, no, I'm not saying people haven't done great things and that we remember them. Don't get me wrong. But their lives just don't stand up to scrutiny.

The wicked will not stand in the judgment, nor sinners in the congregation of the righteous. And that's a sobering thought, isn't it?

[29 : 34] So I ask you to meditate. I ask you to probe your own heart and ask you, what am I? Am I righteous through faith in Christ and living the righteous life that breeds happiness?

Or am I listed still amongst the wicked? And know that today God is pleading with you. He's shouting into your heart and saying, I would have you inherit every blessing and every joy.

I would have you to be happy for eternity if you will just open the door of your heart and let me in and fellowship with you.

Trust me and follow me and put your life of sin away. I know what real joy and real blessedness is. A person I spoke to said she wanted to be happy and her family to be happy.

God wants you to be happy. Really happy. Let's pray. O Lord our God, we thank you that you are a God who is full of joy, Father, Son and Holy Spirit dwelling in eternal joy, fellowshiping together.

[30 : 57] And we thank you that in Christ we somehow mysteriously have access into that fellowship. For we are united to him and he brings us in and he asks us to listen in, as it were, and to participate in the life of God.

Father, we pray that we might know your joy overflowing into our lives.

In Jesus' name, amen.