

Happiness: How Do We Find It?

Defining Happiness—Not Always So Easy!

Benjamin Franklin's many well-known sayings include one that goes, "Early to bed and early to rise makes a man healthy, wealthy, and wise." We could easily argue that having to go to bed early seems like punishment to a lot of people (younger ones in particular) and that getting up early is torture to some. So neither of these things would be high on those people's happiness scale.

But the second part of the saying gives us three elements that many would consider to be important contributors to human happiness: health, wealth, wisdom. Do you agree that these three things would figure in a lot of people's definitions of happiness? Would they figure in your own? What other elements would you include? Take some time to discuss this with other class members.

You may have found, in your discussion, that you came up with different ideas about what would make you happy. A CD player might be "it" for some people; others would prefer a trip to Europe. We are not all made happy by the same things.

Five Things That Bring Happiness

On a sheet of paper (don't put your name on it), write down five things that you feel would make you happy. They can be material items, conditions of life such as fame or the ability to do something very well, relationships you would like to have, or whatever. Number them, with *one* as the highest, in the order in which you think they would contribute to your happiness.



Your teacher will now collect the numbered sheets and pass them out at random. (Of course, make sure you don't get your own back.) To the left of the five numbers on the sheet, put numbers in the order *you* would choose for these five items. You can take turns talking about the choices you made. Are there any items that appear on several lists, and had about the same importance in most people's numberings?

Your teacher will collect the lists again, and put them on a desk or table. Get your own list back, and look at the other person's numbering on your list. Does it surprise you? Does it make you look at your priorities in a new way?

Jesus Christ Taught Us About Happiness

Jesus had many encounters with people seeking happiness, and he basically told them all the same thing: the way to true happiness is to be close to God. But he never treated all people in exactly the same way. Because Jesus really loved people, he saw each one as a one-of-a-kind wonder of God's creation, and offered each person what that person needed, which might not be the same as what someone else needed, to be happy.



Mark 10:11-27. Read the story of one young man who came to Jesus. Answer these questions, and then share your answers with the class.

1. In verse 18, Jesus says, "Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone." He says this because:
 - a. He doesn't want the people standing around to know that he is the Son of God.
 - b. He is not interested in flattery, but in the young man's real question.
 - c. It was illegal then to use the word "good."
2. In verse 21, Jesus looks at the young man and loves him. Why did he feel such love for this person?
 - a. Because the young man's praise (verse 17) made him feel good.
 - b. Because he knew that this was a man struggling to do God's will but finding it hard. Jesus felt compassion for him.
 - c. Because Jesus loved anybody who knew the commandments by heart.
3. In verse 21, Jesus uses a lot of active verbs—go, sell, give, come, follow. Why do you think he did this?
 - a. He liked action.
 - b. He wanted to show his impressive vocabulary to the people so they would be more willing to trust his leadership.
 - c. He was challenging the young man to really *do something* about his life.
4. Why did the man feel sad as he left Jesus?
 - a. He knew that he was passing up a chance for *real* richness as a follower of Jesus by holding on to his money.
 - b. He had hoped Jesus would invite him to join his band of followers that same day.
 - c. He realized he didn't like crowds, which would have been a daily problem if he went around with Jesus.

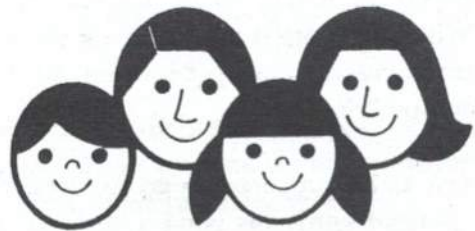
5. Why were the disciples “amazed” at Jesus’ words about wealth in verse 24?
- Wealth had always been considered a blessing from God, and here was Jesus saying it was a hardship!
 - Rich people usually were thought to have *more* chance of getting to heaven because they had the time and money to fulfill the various rituals that the Jewish law required.
 - Both of the above.
 - None of the above.

Luke 19:1-10. Now take a look at another story about a rich man. (Special note: In verse 8, Zacchaeus is making a promise of what he will do from now on. He is not describing something he has always done.) Answer these questions in your own words:

- Why is Zacchaeus happy, unlike the rich young man who was sorrowful?
- Why do you think Jesus doesn’t tell Zacchaeus to sell everything he has, as he told the young man to do?
- Because Zacchaeus is a tax collector for the hated Roman overlords, his fellow Jews dislike him intensely, as is clear in verse 7. How does Jesus silence the “murmuring” crowd? How do you think Jesus’ words might have made the people feel?

Happiness Comes at a Price

If you look through the New Testament, you will see that Jesus never promised people that following him would offer them a prosperous, peaceful, respectable life. He did promise eternal life and joy in God’s presence, but earthly life was never something he said would be terrific.



Often the price we pay for the kind of happiness Jesus promises is to be “out of step” with the world, which can be a very painful thing. Sometimes it means we’ll look like fools to other people. Sometimes it means that we will give more time, effort, and energy to promote something we believe in than other people are willing to give. That can be lonely.

And it is not only church members and saints who have seen this. The 19th-century playwright and novelist Oscar Wilde wrote a story on this subject, too. Read **The Happy Prince** and then answer the questions that follow.

The Happy Prince

(This is an adaptation of a story by the 19th-century writer, Oscar Wilde.)

High above the city, on a tall column, stood the statue of the Happy Prince. He was gilded all over with thin leaves of fine gold, for eyes he had two bright sapphires, and a large red ruby glowed in his sword-hilt.

He was very much admired. The town councilors thought the Happy Prince brought honor to their city, and the small children said that he looked just like an angel, though none of them had ever seen an angel. Parents pointed to the Happy Prince with pride and urged their children to be content and peaceful like the beautiful statue.

One night there flew over the city a little swallow. His friends had gone away to Egypt six weeks before, but he had been delayed.

When he arrived in the city he immediately began to search for a proper place to stay. When he spotted the statue on the tall column he decided to sleep between the feet of the Happy Prince.

Just as he prepared to go to sleep by putting his head under his wing, a large drop of water fell on him. "What a curious thing," he cried. "There is not a single cloud in the sky, the stars are quite clear and bright, and yet it is raining. The climate in the north of Europe is really dreadful."

Then another drop fell. And a third.

Just as the swallow decided to move to a dryer location, he looked up to see tears running down the golden cheeks of the Happy Prince.

His face was so beautiful in the moonlight that the little swallow was filled with pity.

"Who are you?" he said.



"I am the Happy Prince."

"Why are you weeping then?" asked the swallow.

"When I was alive and had a human heart," answered the statue, "I did not know what tears were, for I lived in the Palace of Sans-Souci, where sorrow is not allowed to enter. In the daytime I played with my companions in the garden, and in the evening I led the dance in the Great Hall. Round the garden ran a very lofty wall, but I never cared to ask what lay beyond it, everything about me was so beautiful. My courtiers called me the Happy Prince, and happy indeed I was, if pleasure be happiness. So I lived, and so I died. And now that I am dead they have set me up here so high that I can see all the ugliness and the misery of my city, and though my heart is made of lead yet I cannot choose but weep."

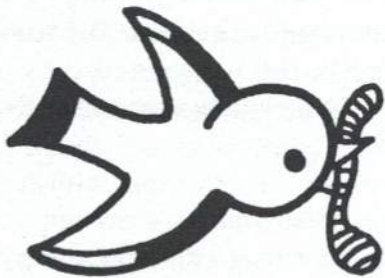
"What! Is he not solid gold?" the swallow thought. He was too polite to make any personal remarks out loud.

"Far away," continued the statue in a low musical voice, "far away in a little street there is a poor house. One of the windows is open, and through it I can see a woman seated at a table. Her face is thin and worn, and she has coarse, red hands, all pricked by the needle, for she is a seamstress."

"In a bed in the corner of the room her little boy is lying ill. He has a fever and is asking for oranges. His mother has nothing to give him but river water, so he is crying. Swallow, swallow, little swallow, will you not bring her the ruby out of my sword-hilt?" My feet are fastened to this pedestal and I cannot move."

"My friends are waiting for me in Egypt," said the swallow. "At present they are flying up and down the Nile, but soon they will go to sleep in the tomb of the great king. The king is wrapped in yellow linen, lying in his coffin, embalmed with spices."

"Swallow, swallow, little swallow," said the prince, "will you not stay with me for one night, and be my messenger? The boy is so thirsty, and the mother is so sad."



"I don't think I like boys," answered the swallow. "Last summer the miller's two rude sons threw stones at me. Of course they never hit me, swallows fly far too well for that, but still it was a mark of disrespect."

But the Happy Prince looked so sad that the little swallow was sorry. "It is very cold here, but I will stay with you for one night and be your messenger," he said.

"Thank you, little swallow," said the prince. So the swallow picked out the great ruby from the prince's sword and flew away with it in his beak over the roofs of the town. He passed

over the cathedral tower, where the white marble angels were sculptured. He passed by the palace and heard the sound of dancing. He passed over the river and saw the lanterns hanging to the masts of the ships.

At last he came to a poor house and looked in. The boy was tossing feverishly on his bed, and the mother had fallen asleep. In he hopped, and he laid the great ruby on the table beside the woman's thimble. Then he flew gently round the bed, fanning the boy's forehead with his wing. "How cool I feel," murmured the boy. "I must be getting better." Then he sank into a delicious slumber.

Then the swallow flew back to the Happy Prince and told him what he had done. "It is curious," he remarked, "but I feel quite warm now, although it is so cold."

"That is because you have done a good action," said the prince. And the little swallow began to think, and then he fell asleep.

When day broke the swallow flew down to the river and had a bath. People were surprised to see a swallow in winter. He flew all about the town for one last look before he headed south to Egypt.

When the moon rose he flew back to the Happy Prince. "Have you any commissions for Egypt?" he cried. "I am just starting."

"Swallow, swallow, little swallow," said the prince, "will you not stay with me one night longer?"

"My friends wait for me in Egypt," protested the swallow.

"Far away across the city I see a young man in a tiny attic apartment. He is leaning over a desk covered with papers, and in a tumbler by his

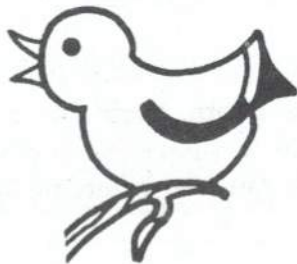
side there is a bunch of withered violets. His hair is brown and crisp, and his lips are red as a pomegranate. He is trying to finish a play for the director of the theater, but he is too cold to write any more. There is no fire in the grate, and hunger has made him faint."

"I will wait with you one night longer," said the swallow, who really had a good heart. "Shall I take another ruby?"

"Alas! I have no ruby now," said the prince. "My eyes are all that I have left. They are made of rare sapphires which were brought out of India a thousand years ago. Pluck out one of them and take it to him. He will sell it to the jeweler and buy firewood and finish his play."

"Dear Prince," said the swallow, "I cannot do that." And he began to weep.

"Swallow, swallow, little swallow," said the prince, "do as I command you."



So the swallow plucked out the prince's eye and flew away to the student's apartment. It was easy enough to get in, as there was a hole in the roof. Through this he darted and came into the room. The young man had his head buried in his hands, so he did not hear the flutter of the bird's wings, and when he looked up he found the beautiful sapphire lying on the withered violets.

"This is a gift from a great admirer," cried the student. "Now I can finish my play."

The next day the swallow flew down to the harbor. He sat on the mast of a large vessel and

shouted, "I am going to Egypt." No one seemed to notice, and when the moon was full he flew back to the Happy Prince.

"I have come to bid you good-bye," he cried.

"Swallow, swallow, little swallow," said the prince, "will you not stay with me one night longer?"

"It is winter," answered the swallow, "and the snow will soon be here. In Egypt the sun is warm, and my companions are building a nest in the Temple of Baalbek. I must leave you now, but I will never forget you, and next spring I will bring you back two beautiful jewels in place of those you have given away. The ruby shall be redder than a red rose, and the sapphire shall be as blue as the great sea."

"In the square below," said the Happy Prince, "there stands a little match-girl. She has let her matches fall in the gutter, and they are all spoiled. Her father will beat her if she does not bring home some money, and she is crying. She has no shoes or stockings, and her little head is bare. Pluck out my other eye and give it to her, and her father will not beat her."

"I will stay with you one night longer," said the swallow, "but I cannot pluck out your eye. You would be quite blind then."

"Swallow, swallow, little swallow," said the prince, "do as I command you."

So he plucked out the prince's other eye and darted down with it. He swooped past the match-girl and slipped the jewel into the palm of her hand. "What a lovely bit of glass!" cried the little girl, and she ran home laughing.

Then the swallow came back to the prince. "You are blind now," he said, "so I will stay with you always."

"No, little swallow," said the poor prince, "you must go away to Egypt."

"I will stay with you always," said the swallow, and he slept at the prince's feet.

All the next day he sat on the prince's shoulder, and told him stories of what he had seen in strange lands. He told him of the Sphinx, who is as old as the world itself, and of the merchants who walk slowly by the side of their camels carrying amber beads in their hands. He told him of green snakes and red ibises and gold fish.

"Dear little swallow," said the prince, "you tell me of marvelous things, but more marvelous than anything is the suffering of men and women. Fly over my city, little swallow, and tell me what you see there."

So the swallow flew over the great city and saw beggars sitting at the gates of palaces and starving children looking listlessly at the black streets. Then he flew back and told the prince what he had seen.

"I am covered with fine gold," said the prince. "You must take it off, leaf by leaf, and give it to my poor. The living always think that gold can make them happy."

Leaf after leaf of the fine gold the swallow picked off, till the Happy Prince looked quite dull and grey. Leaf after leaf of the fine gold he brought to the poor, and the children's faces grew rosier, and they laughed and played games in the street. "We have bread now!" they cried.

Then the snow came, and after the snow came the frost. The streets were so bright and glistening that they looked as if they were made of silver. Long icicles like crystal daggers hung down from the eaves of the houses,

everybody went about in furs, and the little boys wore scarlet caps and skated on the ice.

The poor little swallow grew colder and colder, but he would not leave the prince he loved so well. He picked up crumbs outside the baker's door and tried to keep himself warm by flapping his wings.

But at last he knew that he was going to die. He had just enough strength to fly up to the prince's shoulder once more. "Good-bye, dear prince!" he murmured. "Will you let me kiss your hand?"

"I am glad that you are going to Egypt at last, little swallow," said the prince. "You have stayed too long here, but you must kiss me on the lips, for I love you."

"It is not to Egypt I am going," said the swallow. "I am going to the House of Death. Death is the brother of Sleep, is he not?"

And he kissed the Happy Prince on the lips and fell down dead at his feet.

At that moment a curious crack sounded inside the statue, as if something had broken. The fact is that the leaden heart had snapped right in two.

Early the next morning the mayor and the Two Councilors were walking in the town square. "Dear me, how shabby the Happy Prince looks," the mayor said. "The ruby has fallen out of the sword, his eyes are gone, and he is no longer golden. He looks little better than a beggar."

"Little better than a beggar," the town councilors agreed.

"And there is a dead bird at his feet," the mayor continued. "It is disgusting."

The town councilors pulled down the statue of

the Happy Prince and ordered it to be melted down at the foundry. Several days later the foreman at the foundry reported that though the furnace was very hot it was not able to melt the broken lead heart. "We must throw it away," he said. So they threw it on a dustheap where the dead swallow was also lying.

"Bring me the two most precious things in the city," said God to one of his angels. The angel brought him the leaden heart and the dead bird.

"You have chosen rightly," said God, "for in my garden of paradise this little bird shall sing forevermore, and in my city of gold the Happy Prince shall praise me."

From *Stories for Telling*
Augsburg, Minneapolis, 1986

1. Who, besides the prince, makes a sacrifice in this story? What kind of sacrifice is it?
2. Does the prince look foolish to others? In what way?
3. Does the story indicate that the prince does what he does in order to insure a good future for himself?
4. Read the following Armenian story, **The Ball of Gold**. Do you see any parallels between this non-religious story and the story of the rich young man who came to Jesus? Does it make, in different words, any of the same points about true happiness?

The Ball of Gold

At one time a rich couple and a poor couple lived next door to each other. The poor people, who had a small child, laughed and had great happiness every day. The rich people had much money but were never happy; no sounds of laughter were heard in their house.

One day the rich woman said to her neighbor, "You are poor; you are hungry. Why is it that you are so happy all the time? Every night laughter fills your house and spills outside. It even touches us next door."

The poor woman merely said, "We have a ball of gold. I toss it to my husband, and he tosses it to me. This is what brings us so much happiness."

"A golden ball?" the rich neighbor asked.

"Yes."

So the rich woman went home and told her husband that their neighbors tossed each other a ball of gold each evening. This was the cause of their happiness.

"If that is all, that's nothing," the husband said. "I'll have a beautiful golden ball made. Then we'll toss it to each other, and we'll be happy, just like our neighbors." So the man had a beautiful golden ball made. But when the husband tried to throw it to his wife, it was too heavy to lift. When the wife tried to catch it, it bruised her fingers. Instead of happiness that night, they shed tears of pain.

The next morning the rich woman visited her neighbor again. "Tell me, what kind of golden ball is it that you have? My husband had a golden ball made for us; but it is too heavy to throw and crushes our hands as we catch it. What kind of a ball is it that doesn't hurt you but brings happiness instead?"

"Our golden ball is this beautiful child," the poor woman said. "We toss him to each other, and his joy brings great happiness to us. He is the ball of gold which fills our home with laughter and love."



So you see: the rich try to find happiness in their wealth, but frequently it is without joy. Real happiness is found in family and children. And in this way, the poor can be richer than the rich.

From 100 Armenian Tales

Happiness: How Do We Find It?

Key Concepts



1. The Christian view of happiness has to do with putting others first.
2. Happiness comes from closeness to God; the world gives us another message, namely, that getting more brings happiness.

Objectives



Students will:

1. Evaluate a variety of ideas on what makes for happiness.
2. Enumerate some of Jesus' specific teachings about true happiness.

Background for Teacher



This session uses several stories to make some fairly simple points about the Christian idea of happiness. Can we help our young people not be sucked in by the idea that possessing more things will make them happy? Can we get them to look beyond the idea of “self-fulfillment” to the more subtle, difficult, and rewarding reality of self-forgetting?

These are big questions, indeed. Yet what Christ preached about true happiness was always the same: love God truly, and you will love your fellow human beings; and in this love that puts the other first, you will find happiness.

This session gives our young people a chance to think about those things and to take a look at the things they believe would make them happiest. You may also want to take part in the discussions and list-making, which would be interesting for the students and helpful to you as you hear what they have to say.

- ◆ Sheets of blank paper
- ◆ Bibles
- ◆ Pens or pencils

Materials Needed



1. Open with a prayer. Read or review key points of **Defining Happiness—Not Always So Easy!** with the class and leave a few minutes for discussion as indicated in the second paragraph.

Go on to **Five Things That Bring Happiness**, and follow the instructions in the student text. (You may want to make a list and take part in the discussion too.) After the lists have been passed to other people and renumbered, try to determine what items appeared on many lists, and whether any of these had about the same value (the same number) for most people. At the end of the exercise, give students a chance to talk about it with the questions provided in the student text, or others that the students may come up with.

(15 mins)

Procedure



2. Go on to the Bible study, **Jesus Christ Taught Us About Happiness**. This can be done as a group, in small groups or in pairs. (Answers to the first set of questions on *Mark 10:11-27* are 1-b, 2-b, 3-c, 4-a, 5-c.)

Students may come up with their own ideas in answering the second set of questions on *Luke 19:1-10*, but here are some suggested responses:

1) Zacchaeus knows that his sins are forgiven and that he is ready to follow Christ, whereas the rich young man is tied to his wealth and cannot follow Christ even though he knows it would be true happiness to do so.

2) A really important point here is that Christ sees a great difference between Zacchaeus and the young man. Zacchaeus' wealth is not (or at least no longer is) an obstacle between him and God, whereas the rich young man's wealth is exactly that. Point out to students that Christ did not espouse poverty as some wonderful ideal for everyone. Rather he knew how often wealth can make us self-sufficient and indifferent to others, attitudes which can put terrible distance between us and God. So he knew that wealth *can be* a dangerous and destructive thing.

However, when he met people who used their wealth for the good of others, who were not enslaved by it, he did not tell them to give it all up and wear rags for the rest of their lives. For example, read with the class *Luke 8:1-3* about the women of means who supported the work of the disciples.

3) Jesus reminds them that Zacchaeus is still a son of Abraham, a fellow Jew, and a person entitled to the love of God and of his Son. Perhaps the people resented it; probably they were ashamed and silenced. Jesus did not seem to worry much about the crowd's reaction. Instead he taught them by giving them examples, time and again, of his personal love for each needy soul he met.

(15 mins)

3. Have students read the section called **Happiness Comes At A Price**, which includes the stories of **The Happy Prince** and **The Ball of Gold**. This can be acted out as a group or read silently and discussed in small groups. Answers to the questions:

- 1) The sparrow sacrifices time and energy.
- 2) Yes. He destroys his own beauty for the sake of others.
- 3) No—the prince is not guaranteed anything.
- 4) This story may parallel the rich young man in that wealth here is a burden—the golden ball is no fun; it's too heavy to throw! Real wealth is in something else.

Let students express their ideas.

(25 mins)

4. Close with a prayer.

(5 mins)