

## Does God Just Want us to be Happy?

Ecclesiastes 2:10-11 -

By Russell Muilenburg

Monday, 26 July 2010 00:00

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### *Urban Legends: Does God Just Want us to be Happy?*     ***The Dangers of Smoking***

The following story was reported by United Press International (UPI) and ran in several major newspapers across the country:

JERUSALEM (UPI)—An Israeli woman's all-out war on a cockroach launched a series of mishaps that put her unsuspecting husband in the hospital with burns, two broken ribs, and a cracked pelvis.

The incident, reported Thursday by the Jerusalem Post, occurred last week when a woman from the Tel Aviv area, whose name was withheld, found a cockroach in her living room.

She stomped the bug and tossed it into the toilet. When the critter refused to die, she sprayed an entire can of insecticide into the toilet bowl to finish it off.

Her unsuspecting husband came home from work moments after, perched on the toilet seat and lit up a cigarette. When he finished smoking, he tossed the butt into the toilet.

The cigarette ignited the insecticide fumes and burned "his backside," the Post reported.

As they carried the man down the steps of his house, paramedics asked how he received the peculiar burns. When he responded, they laughed and accidentally dropped the stretcher, causing the man further injuries, the Post said. (from Los Angeles Times, August 26, 1988 quoted by Larry Osborne, *10 Dumb Things Smart Christians Believe*, p. 171-172)

It's an unbelievable story. And yet, it had such a strong pedigree. The Jerusalem Post, United Press International, the Los Angeles Times and other major papers were running it. They know

## Does God Just Want us to be Happy?

Ecclesiastes 2:10-11 -

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Monday, 26 July 2010 00:00

---

their stuff, certainly they wouldn't be taken in by a hoax.

And yet, a few days later, all the papers were running retractions. They'd been snookered. The whole exploding toilet story—while a good warning against the dangers of smoking and bug spray—was an urban legend.

### ***The Dangers of Moving the Line***

So how did the papers get it so wrong? The same way you and I sometimes get taken in by Spiritual Urban Legends. They thought that because something came from a generally reliable source, it must be true. The Jerusalem Post believed the story. So UPI believed it. So the Los Angeles Times believed it. And so on.

“We fall into the same trap in the spiritual realm when we allow our worldview and spiritual paradigms to be based on what we've always heard (or what everyone else believes) rather than careful examination that asks, ‘Is this really true?’” (Osborne, p. 174)

We're in a series about Spiritual Urban Legends. We're talking about some of those ideas and sayings that exist in the church that sound plausible and convincing and are widely believed—but which upon closer examination prove to be untrue.

I think this is a worthwhile topic to be discussing, because if we are building our lives on ideas or thoughts that we think are biblical when they are not, we run the risk of disappointment, disillusionment and despair when things don't work out the way we expect.

Let me give you another illustration. This sounds like an urban legend too, but as far as I can tell, it is true. I found it in at least two credible sources, and couldn't find it discredited on any of the fact checking websites.

It concerns a small Turkish village that was decimated in the massive 1999 Turkish earthquake. Apparently, thirty years earlier, the government had warned the village leaders that their town was on top of a major fault line. The government told them that the whole village

## Does God Just Want us to be Happy?

Ecclesiastes 2:10-11 -

By Russell Mulenburg

Monday, 26 July 2010 00:00

---

would have to be moved, and offered to help with the expense. But the leaders didn't want to move, so instead they bribed some of the geological officials to redraw the map—this time moving the fault line so that the maps no longer showed the village to be in danger.

For a while, it worked out great. The villagers got to keep their homes. They stayed connected to their heritage. Property values stayed up. No problems—until, that is, the earthquake hit. (Osborne, p. 175)

Now, like I said, that might just be an Urban Legend. But whether it is real or not, it illustrates the danger of building our lives on things we want to be true, instead of the Truth of God's Word. You might sincerely believe some of these Urban Legends we're talking about, they might bring you comfort for awhile, but sooner or later the truth will come out.

And I think that's especially true of the myth we are going to talk about today: the idea that **what God most wants for us in life is our happiness.**

□

The logic behind this urban legend goes something like this: happiness is good. God is also good. Therefore, God must want me to be happy.

More than that, here in America, we feel like happiness is a birthright. The Declaration of Independence says that we are all endowed with the inalienable right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. So many of the things marketed to us are sold with the implicit promise that they will make us happy. The idea is that if something makes you feel good, you should do it.

And we believe that so strongly, that we've stamped all things happy with God's seal of approval.

### ***Happy Mistakes***

So what's the problem? Am I saying that God is opposed to our happiness?

## Does God Just Want us to be Happy?

Ecclesiastes 2:10-11 -

By Russell Mulenburg

Monday, 26 July 2010 00:00

---

I need to be careful here, because I realize a lot of people have been raised with that impression of God. Some people have had such bad experiences with strict churches or overzealous parents that they can only imagine God as a kind of cosmic killjoy, who sits in heaven and watches for the slightest sign of fun, then reaches down and swats us—like He's got one of those portable bug zappers.

I need to say right up front that God is NOT opposed to our happiness. He is not offended when we smile or laugh or do something that brings us pleasure.

What I do want to talk about, though, is the dangers that come when we believe that our happiness is the most important thing in the world. I can think of at least 3 **problems** that come when we start believing this myth.

### 1. We Fake Happiness.

If you are Christian, and you believe that God really wants you to be happy, then you might feel pressure to pretend to be happy, even when you're not.

Tell me if this sounds familiar: you slept a little late on a Sunday morning, the kids didn't want to eat what was offered for breakfast and didn't want to wear the clothes you set out for them, on the ride to church you got into a fight with your spouse. By the time the car pulls into the parking lot the littlest is crying, the other two are screaming at each other, and you and your spouse aren't talking. Then you turn and say to everybody: "We're going to church now, so get happy!"

Because we believe God wants us happy we put on a false front of happiness whenever we are at church or around church friends. People greet us in the halls and say "How's it going?" and the answer is always "Great, just great" even when we are not—actually—doing all that great.

Sometimes, when we're around people that we know don't believe in Jesus—and we're trying to invite them to church or show Jesus to them—we feel like we have to be happy all the time. We figure the best advertisement for Jesus will be to show them how happy we are. God wants us

## Does God Just Want us to be Happy?

Ecclesiastes 2:10-11 -

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Monday, 26 July 2010 00:00

---

to be happy, we figure, so we better show people that it's working.

But here's the thing: it's not real. People can tell when we're faking it. They aren't looking for insincere, plastered on smiles. They're looking for genuine, real people who have genuine, real problems.

During one of our planning meetings the other day, Mary told a story about a friend of hers at college. Mary was on her way to a praise and worship gathering, and asked her friend to join her. But the friend declined. "It's just too happy," she said. "All the songs are so happy. Everybody puts on a happy face. It doesn't seem real."

The band Casting Crowns sings a song called *Stained Glass Masquerade* that asks:

Are we happy plastic people  
Under shiny plastic steeples  
With walls around our weakness  
And smiles to hide our pain? If we buy into the myth that says God just wants us to be happy, we might be tempted to fake being happy even when we are not. We lie to ourselves, we lie to others, and we give a hollowed-out impression of what Christianity really is.

### 2. We chase happiness.

A second problem with this myth is that it may lead us in an unfulfilling quest after happiness. If we believe that the most important thing in life is to be happy, we'll try experience after experience in order to find happiness.

That's what happened to the Teacher in the book of Ecclesiastes. Written either by King Solomon or a ghost-writer for King Solomon—Ecclesiastes is all about the apparent absurdity of life. In chapter 2, the Teacher goes on a quest for pleasure. He tries laughter. He indulges himself with wine. He undertakes great projects—houses and vineyards, gardens and parks and fruit trees. He buys slaves. He owns flocks and herds. He amasses gold and silver, the treasure of kings and provinces. He brings in the best singers. He brings in hundreds of women to form

## Does God Just Want us to be Happy?

Ecclesiastes 2:10-11 -

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Monday, 26 July 2010 00:00

---

his own harem. He becomes, in his words, “greater by far than anyone in Jerusalem” before him.

And yet, this is  
**his conclusion**

:

10  
I denied myself nothing my eyes desired;  
I refused my heart no pleasure.  
My heart took delight in all my work,  
and this was the reward for all my labor. <sup>11</sup> Yet when I surveyed all that my hands had  
done  
and what I had toiled to achieve,  
everything was meaningless, a chasing after the wind;  
nothing was gained under the sun. After trying everything he could get his hands on, he  
found he hadn't gained anything. The Teacher in Ecclesiastes discovered the truth that  
everybody who has ever chased happiness has discovered—it is temporary, it doesn't last, and  
it only leaves you wanting more. Chasing happiness is like chasing the wind.

The irony is; the more we have, the less happy we are. I heard this week that the magazine  
*The Economist*  
has been conducting a research project since 1972. It has been tracking thousands of people  
and asking them to measure their happiness. What it has discovered is that—overall-- people  
are actually less happy today than they were in 1972. (“God wants me to be happy”  
<http://searchablesermons.com/>  
)

Now think about that: think about how much wealthier we are today, think about the advances in  
technology and health care and instant communication. We have way more today than we did in  
1972, and yet we aren't any happier.

Chasing happiness doesn't make us happy.

## Does God Just Want us to be Happy?

Ecclesiastes 2:10-11 -

By Russell Mulenburg

Monday, 26 July 2010 00:00

---

### 3. We Bow to Happiness.

Probably the biggest danger with this myth is that it can lead us to justify all sorts of questionable decisions on the basis of doing what makes us happy.

I'll never forget the discussion I had on my front steps several years ago when I was pastoring a different church. A deacon in the church had just come to tell me that he was leaving his wife and two kids for another woman. He knew his decision did not square with his position as a deacon. He knew that the Bible said it was wrong. He knew he was burning bridges with friends and siblings and his own parents. So why, I wondered, was he doing it?

"Because," he said, "I'm not happy with my wife. But my girlfriend makes me happy. And I believe God just wants me to be happy."

He believed the myth and bought the t-shirt. He couldn't believe God would want him to give up something that made him feel so good. If it was really wrong, he figured God would make him unhappy. But as it was, this is what felt right, and he was going for it.

In the book of

### **Philippians**

Paul writes about those who live as enemies of the cross of Jesus. He says about them:

19

Their destiny is destruction, their god is their stomach, and their glory is in their shame. Their mind is on earthly things.

When we believe that the most important thing God wants for us in life is our happiness, we have a tendency to make gods out of our stomachs. We direct our lives by what feels best.

### ***What Could be Better than Happiness?***

## Does God Just Want us to be Happy?

Ecclesiastes 2:10-11 -

By Russell Mulenburg

Monday, 26 July 2010 00:00

---

So those are some of the problems with this myth. We fake happiness, we chase happiness, and we bow down to happiness. But if God's greatest desire for us is not happiness, what does He want for us? What could be

**better than happiness**

?

I think if we really searched the Bible, we could generate quite a list of things that are more important to God than our happiness. But I've thought of three things that correspond to the three problems we just covered.

### 1. □ **Honesty.**

I think God wants us to be honest with ourselves, with others, and with Him about how we are feeling. I don't think God wants "happy plastic people" wearing pretend smiles and forcing a silver lining onto everything that happens.

I say that because of the honesty of the Bible. Of the 150 poems that make up the book of Psalms, at least 1/3 of them can be classified as laments. That is, they are poems that start out not by praising God, not by telling God how great He is, but by complaining about how rotten things are.

Take

### **Psalm 55**

for example. Here's how it starts:

1

Listen to my prayer, O God,

do not ignore my plea; <sup>2</sup> hear me and answer me.

My thoughts trouble me and I am distraught    The Psalms can be almost startling in their honesty. David is not having a good day, and he's not afraid to tell God about it.

**He goes on:**

## Does God Just Want us to be Happy?

Ecclesiastes 2:10-11 -

By Russell Mulenburg

Monday, 26 July 2010 00:00

---

4

My heart is in anguish within me;  
the terrors of death assail me. <sup>5</sup> Fear and trembling have beset me;  
horror has overwhelmed me. I'm guessing if you had asked David how things were going on the day he wrote this, he would not have smiled and said "Great, just great."

Now, I realize that when you ask someone how they are doing, you don't really want to hear a litany of their latest troubles. There's some social convention there. But there is a place in Christianity for honest lament and reflection on the genuine hurts in life. The church should be a place you can bring your brokenness and pain. We don't have to force happiness when it's not there. God doesn't want us to be faking it.

## 2. Trust

Instead of chasing after the next great experience all the time, or trying to capture that elusive happiness, God asks us to trust that He will provide us with what we need.

## Hebrews 11

has great illustration taken from the life of Moses:

24

By faith Moses, when he had grown up, refused to be known as the son of Pharaoh's daughter.

25

He chose to be mistreated along with the people of God rather than to enjoy the pleasures of sin for a short time.

26

He regarded disgrace for the sake of Christ as of greater value than the treasures of Egypt, because he was looking ahead to his reward.

As a Prince of Egypt, Moses had the opportunity to chase happiness wherever he thought he might find it. But rather than enjoy the pleasures of sin for a short time, he trusted that God had a reward that would be worth waiting for. So he traded in the palace for wandering in the desert.

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Ecclesiastes 2:10-11 -

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---

In the same way, God wants us to trust that He knows what is best for us. He wants us to view long-term joy as of more value than short-term pleasures.

### 3. Obedience

Often when I hear somebody say: “I believe God just wants me to be happy” I know they are trying to justify something both they and I know is wrong. It really means that they don’t care what God wants at that moment, they are only concerned with what they want.

But when those situations arise, the Bible is pretty clear about what God wants from us. In John 14,

**Jesus says**

:

15

“If you love me, you will obey what I command...

23

If anyone loves me, he will obey my teaching. My Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our home with him.

24

He who does not love me will not obey my teaching. These words you hear are not my own; they belong to the Father who sent me.

Clearly, our faith expressed through obedience is more important to God than our short-term happiness.

Now, don’t get me wrong. I’m not saying that obedience will always be unpleasant. Often, doing the right thing is also the thing that will make us the most happy—if not immediately, then almost certainly in the long-run.

But if it comes down to a choice between doing what God says is right, and something that we think will make us happy right now; God asks us to choose obedience. Even if we don’t feel great about it at the moment. Even if we’re not sure how it will work out.

## Does God Just Want us to be Happy?

Ecclesiastes 2:10-11 -

By Russell Mulenburg

Monday, 26 July 2010 00:00

---

### ***Happiness vs. Joy***

The idea that what God most wants for us in life is our happiness is a myth. It's as dangerous as redrawing the map so that the village no longer appears to sit on the fault line. It can lead us to fake happiness, to chase it, or bow down to it. We can end up shaping our lives in ways that have little to do with what God actually says.

But, again, I don't want you to think that I'm opposed anything good in life. I don't want you to get the impression that this church is a giant, fun-free zone. I don't want you to think that God is all dour and grim and severe.

Because that's not true. In fact, I think there is one more thing God wants for us far more than happiness, and that's

**joy**

.

Joy is central to the kind of church we want to be. Our mission statement says that we are here to bring joy to Jesus and to experience joy in Him. I'd say that if there is one single idea that I want to give my life to, it is the idea that living for Jesus is the best possible life any of us can live.

But it's important for us to see that there is a difference between happiness and joy.

Whenever you are happy, you are probably also experiencing joy. But joy is something you can also experience even when you are not happy.

Happiness is temporary. You see it in the word itself: Happiness = what's "happening". If you say, "I'm happy" you're really saying "I feel good, right now." Happiness is dependent on circumstances.

## Does God Just Want us to be Happy?

Ecclesiastes 2:10-11 -

By Russell Mulenburg

Monday, 26 July 2010 00:00

---

But joy is different. It's deeper. It lasts even in the midst of the trials of life. Joy isn't dependent on circumstances. Joy is strength. Joy is internal. Joy is eternal.

It's possible to have joy even when we are being honest about difficulties we are facing.

It's possible to have joy even as we are trusting God for something better.

It's possible to have joy even as we pass on something we know is wrong in order to obey what we know is right.

Joy doesn't come from what is happening now; but instead comes from the firm conviction that Jesus has all that we need.

Here's what  
**Jesus said**

:

10

If you obey my commands, you will remain in my love, just as I have obeyed my Father's commands and remain in his love.

11

I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete.

Jesus came, not so that we could be happy--though He's not opposed to us being happy—but so that we could have joy. And that's much better.

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