

The Quest for Happiness

Rise & Shine, May 17th

Proverbs 17:22

*A cheerful heart is a good medicine,
but a downcast spirit dries up the bones.*

Proverbs 12:25

*Anxiety weighs down the human heart,
but a good word cheers it up.*

Psalm 94:19

*When the cares of my heart are many,
your consolations cheer my soul.*

Questions:

1. If you could ask God for one thing to make you happy, what would you request? Would you have answered that question differently when you were younger, and if so, what would you have requested in the past?
 2. Has your view of the source of happiness changed over the years, and if so, how and why has your view changed?
 3. How can we nurture joy when our life is full of pain?
 4. How well does Redeemer enhance joy and happiness in the lives of those that attend? How can we do better?
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In the News

People Flock to Yale's Most Popular Course Ever on How to Be Happy

More than 2.2 million people, including more than 500,000 since April 1, have enrolled in Yale cognitive psychology professor Laurie Santos' free 10-week online class, "The Science of Well-Being," making it the most popular course in the university's 316-year history. On campus, the course is titled "Psychology and the Good Life," aka "The Happiness Course."

Santos found the demand for the class "a bit surreal," but understandable, given that "people are looking for evidence-based ways of improving their mental health," she said. Santos also hosts "The Happiness Lab" podcast. Santos' class in "positive psychology" or "happiness studies" focuses on well-being rather than on easing suffering, as a means to happiness.

The course questions conventional wisdom that one needs certain things in order to be happy: things such as a good job, plenty of money, a perfect love relationship, physical beauty, strength, skills or possessions. Any of those things may give pleasure for a time, but it tends to be short-lived. Such measuring sticks can lead to comparing oneself to others, which may result in pride, envy, competitiveness, insecurity and discontent.

That said, living in extreme poverty is no fun either, and often contributes to misery. A minimum income is generally required for basic subsistence, if not for a life in which people can thrive. But once basic needs are met, the perennial drive to acquire more doesn't necessarily lead to more joy. Tim Wilson at the University of Virginia and Dan Gilbert at Harvard characterized the belief that we would be happy if only we could acquire X as "miswanting."

The old saying, attributed to publisher billionaire Malcolm Forbes, that "he who dies with the most toys wins," seems to belie the fact that the person who dies with the most toys is just as dead as the person who dies with fewer toys or with no toys at all. While having adequate income does provide a certain amount of comfort, greater affluence doesn't automatically translate into greater happiness.

Santos encourages students to take time to evaluate what really contributes to happiness in life, assigning homework such as making a regular effort to connect in a meaningful way socially; savoring an experience, large or small; writing down five things for which they are grateful at the end of each day; expressing appreciation to people who have impacted them in big or small ways; performing a daily act of kindness; or paying attention to (being mindful of) the present moment. "A gratitude letter is one of the most powerful tools for increasing happiness because it can forge social bonds and really change someone's life," Santos says.

Santos recommends that students use a technique called "negative visualization," asking themselves, "What if I didn't have this thing?" Imagining what our lives would be like without the things we have can help us appreciate our blessings more.

Many recent enrollees in the course say they are using the time when they are sheltering at home to take stock of their approach to life and to develop tools

to enhance their happiness. "It's a huge opportunity for introspection, spiritual renewal and creativity," said Arthur Brooks, who teaches a happiness and leadership class at Harvard Business School. Brooks, a practicing Christian, said people who take his course in the pursuit of personal happiness often discover that self-focus is not the path to that end. "If I live under the illusion I'm the only thing that matters," Brooks said, "I become anxious and unhappy."

Happiness studies can motivate people to look for meaning and purpose in working for goals that are bigger than the self, such as the common good.

Isaiah 65:17-19

*For I am about to create new heavens
and a new earth;
the former things shall not be remembered
or come to mind.
But be glad and rejoice forever
in what I am creating;
for I am about to create Jerusalem as a joy,
and its people as a delight.
I will rejoice in Jerusalem,
and delight in my people;
no more shall the sound of weeping be heard in it,
or the cry of distress.*

Psalms 40:4, 7-9

*Happy are those who make
the LORD their trust,
who do not turn to the proud,
to those who go astray after false gods. ...
Then I said, "Here I am;
in the scroll of the book it is written of me.
I delight to do your will, O my God;
your law is within my heart."
I have told the glad news of deliverance
in the great congregation;
see, I have not restrained my lips,
as you know, O LORD.*

A General Thanksgiving (BCP p. 836)

Accept, O Lord, our thanks and praise for all that you have done for us. We thank you for the splendor of the whole creation, for the beauty of this world, for the wonder of life, and for the mystery of love.

We thank you for the blessing of family and friends, and for the loving care which surrounds us on every side.

We thank you for setting us at tasks which demand our best efforts, and for leading us to accomplishments which satisfy and delight us.

We thank you also for those disappointments and failures that lead us to acknowledge our dependence on you alone.

Above all, we thank you for your Son Jesus Christ; for the truth of his Word and the example of his life; for his steadfast obedience, by which he overcame temptation; for his dying, through which he overcame death; and for his rising to life again, in which we are raised to the life of your kingdom.

Grant us the gift of your Spirit, that we may know him and make him known; and through him, at all times and in all places, may give thanks to you in all things. *Amen.*