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HAPPINESS

Pastor Mark Doecke

I used to be quite content with how I spent my leisure time. I used to be quite satisfied with the holidays my family and I took each year. Once upon a time, I used to be happy just being able to dream of a holiday in some exotic location.

But all that changed when I started watching programs like *100 Things You must **Try** Before you Die*, which then progressed to *100 Things You Must **Do** Before you Die*, and the *100 Things You must **See** Before you Die*.... And programs like *Getaway* and the *Great Outdoors* didn't help much either. Now I realise how poor my life really is! Now I want to travel the world, try everything there is to try, be a thrill seeker, a risk-taker in my leisure time, get into some **extreme** sports!... I was happy with my life until someone told me about all the things I was missing out on. I was content until someone showed me how boring I was...

The problem with many of these leisure and holiday shows is that they give the impression that the main aim in life is to get as much as you can out of it. But is that really the purpose of living? Is that really the way to gain happiness and fulfilment?

Many Australians are enjoying a very high standard of living. And with better telecommunications we know more about what's available right across the world. But it hasn't made us any happier. In fact, it's quite the opposite. We often are more dissatisfied because of these things. And we can experience a heightened sense of emptiness, and even futility about living.

In the film *The Pursuit of Happiness* the central character, played by Will Smith, is so determined to 'make his fortune' that he risks everything to do so. In his efforts to make quick money his marriage fails. He even loses his home. Finally he breaks through – and makes the money he dreams of. Although an interesting and moving examination of homelessness, the film fails in that it repeats the myth that the key to happiness lies in becoming rich. It perpetuates the view that once you have plenty of money you will be happy. The film should really be entitled, *The Pursuit of Money*. Yet, we know from a brief look at the lives of the rich and famous that they are no happier than we are. Money is useful, but it alone won't make us happy.

So if it's not making lots of money, if it's not travelling the world to exotic or amazing destinations, what is the recipe for happiness?

I don't think there is one as such because I don't think that happiness is something that can be found if it's directly sought.

Let me illustrate this with a story. It's a story from the Bible that Jesus tells. A ruler of a country goes away for a while. He leaves three of his top men with a whole heap of money expecting them to use it well while he's away. When he returns he finds two of the men used the money well, but the third man hid his portion away. And he gets angry at the man who did nothing with his money. Jesus told this story to make this point: ***Life is not about what you get, but what you give. Life is not about hoarding up selfishly, but giving generously – of your time, talents and resources. And when you share your gifts – when you use your gifts to give - you will be rewarded a hundred times in surprising ways.***

As a Christian I believe everything I have is a gift from God – my talents, my money, and what I'm good at. And over the years I've often thought about Jesus' story and asked myself: "Am I doing the most with what God has given me?" But it's not a legalistic thing that binds me. God doesn't want me to be hamstrung by his expectation that I do the most with what I have. Rather, he wants me to use these gifts because I want to. In some ways it's a giving back to God. It's a way of saying to God, "Thanks for giving me this. I want to give back to you and to the people and the world you made." But there is a crunch: If you don't use your gifts, your talents, you might find they are taken away. On the other hand, if you do use them to help others, they will increase.

Think for a moment: What gifts, what talents, do you have? Are you using these things for the good of others or for yourself?

Happiness is fulfilment. But it's my belief that if we try to fulfil ourselves directly we will never be happy. There are no sadder specimens than those who keep pulling themselves up by the roots to see how they are growing.

Surely, the truth lies in some other words of Jesus when he said, "*Whoever tries to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life will save it.*"

I think this is a bit like what I recall once seeing written on a desk diary:

Down in their heart wise people know the truth: the only way to help yourself is to help others.

Jesus is clear in this: Don't seek happiness directly. It will come as a result of focusing not on ourselves, but on other things and on other people. It will come from using what God has given us, not for ourselves, but for others.

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