

## BAD GOALS FOR YOUR LIFE

### **BE HAPPY!**

Luke 15:11-24

I grew up Lutheran. Lutherans are not known to be particularly joyful people. They are practical. Somber. Lutherans are more on the quiet, humble side of the scale. They don't like to be showy. Praying outloud in a group is too showy for many of us.

Garrison Keilor for many years on the radio told stories about fictional Lutherans in a small town. He used to say about Lutherans *"we were not brought up to experience pleasure. It doesn't register on us. It's like trying to write on glass with a pencil. Sunlight makes us gloomy. We are not Mediterranean people. We're Lutheran people. I don't like to generalize about Lutherans, but one thing that's true of every single last one of them without a single exception is that the low point of their year is their summer vacation."*

We're Cautious people. If something is going GREAT in life, the wildest, happiest emotion we can express is we will say, "Well, it could be worse." (that means "it's GREAT") [turn to neighbor and express ecstatic happiness in the words: ] "Well, it could be worse." Isn't that HAPPY!?

Garrison Keilor used to say that Lutherans aren't happy, emotional people. In church services, It's always Lent, and every Sunday is Good Friday. (not happy at all)

These days, Americans LIVE for happiness. Who heard it said, or said it yourself, "I just want my kids / my family / my life – to BE HAPPY"???

Declaration of Independence mentions, *"Life, Liberty, and the ... pursuit of ... happiness."* That's become the American dream. That's what we live for. The goal people live for today is Be HAPPY.

But, we need to ask, is happiness a GOOD goal to live for? AND is happiness a goal that God wants for our lives?

To do this, we will look at a much loved, well known parable Jesus told. A parable is an earthly story with a heavenly (spiritual) meaning. Today we will focus on Parable of Prodigal Son, which was read a few minutes ago, and it is printed in today's bulletin hand-out.

**<sup>11</sup> Then Jesus said, "A man had two sons. <sup>12</sup> The younger son said to his father, 'Father, give me my share of the property.' So the father divided his property between his two sons.**

**<sup>13</sup> "After a few days, the younger son gathered his possessions and left for a country far away from home. There he wasted everything he had on a wild lifestyle. <sup>14</sup> He had nothing left when a severe famine spread throughout that country. He had nothing to live on. <sup>15</sup> So he got a job from someone in that country and was sent to feed pigs in the fields. <sup>16</sup> No one in the country would give him any food, and he was so hungry that he would have eaten what the pigs were eating.**

**<sup>17</sup> "Finally, he came to his senses. He said, 'How many of my father's hired men have more food than they can eat, while I'm starving to death here? <sup>18</sup> I'll go at once to my father, and I'll say to him, "Father, I've sinned against heaven and you. <sup>19</sup> I don't deserve to be called your son anymore. Make me one of your hired men.'"**

**<sup>20</sup> "So he went at once to his father. While he was still at a distance, his father saw him and felt sorry for him. He ran to his son, put his arms around him, and kissed him. <sup>21</sup> Then his son said to him, 'Father, I've sinned against heaven and you. I don't deserve to be called your son anymore.'**

**<sup>22</sup> "The father said to his servants, 'Hurry! Bring out the best robe, and put it on him. Put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. <sup>23</sup> Bring the fattened calf, kill it, and let's celebrate with a feast. <sup>24</sup> My son was dead and has come back to life. He was lost but has been found.' Then they began to celebrate. Luke 15:11-24**

Some simple truths draw out of story: The first truth is this: **Things can bring you happiness.** Jesus tells us that the younger son asks for his share of the inheritance, he takes the money -- a LOT of money – and then he goes away. He went where daddy can't see him. He is probably ashamed because he wouldn't live this way at home. He lives a "wild lifestyle." Partying.

He blew his money on "*wine, women, & song.*" These days we say "*sex, drugs, & rock n' roll,*" or "*What happens in Vegas, stays ... on your credit card bill.*"

Was this young man happy? ... yes! Things are gifts from God. God made world material. Things can give pleasure.

Happiness is OK. But not as a goal for your life.

Things and events that make you happy are good in and of themselves, and they are gifts from God. But it's when you love being happy too much, its when in your life you put things giving you happiness out of the order God intended – then your love of things becomes wrong, and sinful.

problem with happiness being THE GOAL for living is that **Happiness is dependent on my circumstances.**

Happiness is cause and effect. Something HAPPENS and it makes you feel happy. There is a cause and effect. Something happens and the effect is I feel happy.

Do you remember how when Oprah Winfrey had her daily television show, she would give extravagant gifts to her audience? Imagine that today, right now, we are going to have an Oprah moment here, and give everyone present .... a new car! Keys are falling from ceiling. People jumping in excitement. Some weeping. Some saying, "*I love this church! I just feel so happy!*"

Imagine it were true: If you were given new car, how would you feel? Happiness is cause and effect. Happiness is brought on by a good event.

Now, let's change the picture. Again, let's use everyone's car. Imagine an usher just gave me a note that says that while you were in here, someone just keyed every car in parking lot. Now how do you feel?

So you see that you would be so HAPPY when something *good* happens. And then you can be instantly SAD when something *BAD* happens.

This means happiness is something that happens TO you. Happiness is external. “I’m happy if ... the right guy smiles at me in class.” “I’m happy if ... I get a raise ... if my kids get good grades ... IF the Browns win the Superbowl. (That’s why some of you haven’t been happy for such a long time! )

Another truth Jesus teaches us in His story is that **The pursuit of happiness doesn’t deliver** the happiness you are really seeking. Is the younger son happy in Jesus’ story? YES, He IS happy. But not long term. He soon finds himself working in a pig farm, eating pig food. That’s not a happy place for anybody – especially not a happy place for a Jewish boy. He sets out to find happiness, but his pursuit doesn’t bring him happiness long-term.

Just recently a new iPhone came out. Suppose a few months ago you bought the latest and greatest iPhone, an iPhone 14. But since then, the iPhone 14 Plus came out. Then the iPhone 14 Pro came out. And now, the coolest, most amazing gadget is the iPhone 14 Pro Max.

A few months ago you were happy with your iPhone 14. But now that newer models with more features came out, yours is suddenly obsolete. So are you as happy with what you have? Or do we say, “I want a new one! I’m so tired of this old thing!” Today’s contentment, becomes the source of tomorrow’s complaining. What it takes to make you happy is a moving target.

Pursuing happiness with your life, doesn’t lead to happiness. And **The pursuit of happiness leads to coveting. *Just as Death and Destruction are never satisfied, so human desire is never satisfied.***  
Proverbs 27:20

Coveting is wanting something so much, that the desire, the greed, leads you into sin. The desire for more, leads you to do something else that’s really wrong and awful.

Jesus’ story shows: The younger son, didn’t want to wait until the father died. One Bible scholar puts it like this: “In Middle-

Eastern culture, to ask for the inheritance while the father is still alive is to wish him dead. “

So the younger son gave his father the middle finger, asks for 1/3 of everything the father owns, and then takes off because he loves the money more than his father. Young boy’s desire for happiness leads him to commit sin, do awful things!

How about you? In your desire to find happiness have you ever lied? bent the truth? not been 100% completely honest? taking something – anything – that’s not yours?

Seeking happiness easily becomes coveting and leads to sin.

Third, **pursuing happiness with your life becomes idolatry.**

Feeling happy becomes the most important thing in our life. Feeling happy becomes not A goal, but THE goal -- the #1 TOP Priority. Happiness becomes more important to us than following God. We think about happiness, plot to have it, more than we love, think about, and want to be closer to God.

In Jesus’ story the younger son for many years has been part of the family. He’s obeyed the father, eaten with the father, doing what sons normally do. But when the son says, “Give me my money NOW” it means that all along, the son had actually been after the father’s THINGS, rather than after the father. He wanted the father’s THINGS rather than the joy and happiness of the father.

**Idolatry today is wanting God the Father’s things, rather than the joy and happiness of the father.**

We do that in our pursuit of pleasure. We want the happiness, the things, the vacations, the cars, the food that makes us feel happy. And those THINGS, the experiences, and the happy sensations become more important to us, than being with our Heavenly FATHER.

**Happiness comes from earthly conditions;**

Can you get happiness from our world? Yes, you can. If you buy a new house, earn a big paycheck, or eat a big ice cream sundae, will you have happiness? Yes you will. But the problem is: tomorrow that happiness won’t be enough. You’ll need more. You’ll never be satisfied. The pleasures of this world are empty, hollow,

they have no meaning, they don't last. **Joy comes from a relationship with God.**

But there is another state of being. It's Joy. The kind of joy that Jesus gives is fulfilling. He offers forgiveness, complete, sweet forgiveness for all the wrong you've done, and for all the good you haven't done. It doesn't matter who you are or where you've been. He knows it all. He died to pay for it all. He forgives it all. Will you just accept Him, and TRUST in Jesus as your forgiver, and the leader of your life?! Let Him GIVE you heaven. He paid your way to heaven (you can't!). Heaven is a place of forever being in the joyful presence of God Himself!

Jesus' story is a story of a young son seeking happiness and it's not a happy story – it's a story filled with tragedy, UNTIL ... until the Father receives his son back. Then, suddenly, the story turns to one of great JOY. There is joy when the Father and his child are back together. And what Jesus is saying to you today is: Joy comes from a relationship with God.

Are you in a relationship with God? Do you trust in Jesus – that is, trust that what Jesus did to pay for all sins in His death on the cross is for you. Are you Baptized and do you believe the promises God has attached to your baptism? Those promises are that God delivers the forgiveness Jesus won through the water and His Word in your baptism. Do you trust Jesus who gives you the purity needed for you to go to heaven? Do you look to God the Father for food, clothes, life itself and all you need? Do you want a closer relationship with the Father and Jesus in your life? When you are in faith like this, God, the Holy Spirit works in your life new qualities. God promises you that ***When the Holy Spirit controls our lives, he will produce this kind of love in us: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.*** Galatians 5:22-23

The Holy Spirit works in you to become joyful like your Father God.

This makes sense. God is not a grumpy sourpuss. He is the most joyful being in the universe! God is WAY more joyful than we are!

We are introduced to God as He creates the world, and at the end of each day He pronounces “It is good!” And God the Father does the happy dance. He’s joyful! The Father is joyfully delighted in the world He created. And you are part of this world. He is joyfully delighted in the unique person He has made you to be.

The problem is not that God is an old sour-puss. The problem is not that God is angry and punishing and demanding. He’s not! God’s a joy-filled God! It is we who have sinned, turned away from being with our fun-loving, joyful God. We’ve filled our lives with sadness and worry. God is happier than we are! Joy is at the heart of God Himself. And joy is at the heart of God’s plan for you!

Joy, then, is different from happiness. Joy is NOT dependent on your circumstances. **Joy is constant, even in pain.** God says, *“Always be full of joy in the Lord.”* Even in times of pain in your life, be full of joy in the Lord. And for good measure, he repeats it: ***I say it again – rejoice!*** Philippians 4:4



Eight years ago Sue and I went on a mission trip to Guatemala. We worked among very poor people to give them clean water. The poverty there was the worst I have ever seen. This is a picture I took of a typical house. The people there have so little.



😊 We met this boy. His name is Franklin. He comes from a poor family. His parents sent his 2 older brothers to school, but can’t afford to send him. With no education, Franklin is almost certainly doomed to a life of extreme poverty. Like the

other children there, they have no toys to play with. They are blessed if they have just one meal a day – usually corn tortillas and black beans. That’s it. Some families are rich and have 2 meals a day. None of the kids have toys. Everyone lives day-to-day. But even with all that against him, Franklin, like the other children there, is the most joyful kid we’d ever met. Much more joyful than the children here in America who have so much.

For you, when your life is full of troubles, sickness, relational pain, physical pain. Still, there is a joy that God can give you. *“Rejoice in the Lord ALWAYS.” It’s so important I’ll say it again: REJOICE!”*

**A joy-giving relationship with God requires humility.**

“Finally, he came to his senses. He said, ‘How many of my father’s hired men have more food than they can eat, while I’m starving to death here? <sup>18</sup> I’ll go at once to my father, and I’ll say to him, “Father, I’ve sinned against heaven and you. <sup>19</sup> I don’t deserve to be called your son anymore. Make me one of your hired men.”’ Vss. 17-19

Because joy comes from being back with the Father, with God, we see in Jesus’ story that there is one thing that stands in the way of the boy’s relationship with his Dad. It’s his pride. He has to come to his senses, admit his wrongs, and now, without a swagger, the son comes back to his father. A joy-giving relationship with God requires humility.

Many people will miss out on the joy God our Father offers, because their pride stands in the way.

Folks, don’t miss out! Will YOU come to God humbly? Confess your sin? Admit the mess you keep on making of your life. And let God offer his joyful forgiveness.

And when the son comes back, before he even gets one word of his rehearsed apology speech out of his mouth, the Father already hugs him, welcomes him home, and the joy begins.

The joyful celebration wasn’t dependent on what the son did. It was a gift, free and clear, from the Father.

**He ran to his son, put his arms around him, and kissed him.** Vs. 20b



One more thing I see in this story is that Joy gives more than happiness ever can.

**The father said to his servants, ‘Hurry! Bring out the best robe, and put it on him. Put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. <sup>23</sup> Bring the fattened calf, kill it, and let’s celebrate with a feast. <sup>24</sup> My son was dead and has come back to life. He was lost but has been found.’ Then they began to celebrate.** Vss. 22-24

The father killed the fatted calf. The fatted calf would feed A LOT of people! Back in those days you almost never ate meat. Meat was a delicacy.

The fattened calf was an extreme delicacy because it was meat that was lavish, it was extreme, you almost never did it. So by killing the fattened calf, the father was throwing a party for the entire village. It was probably the biggest feast the village had ever seen, and the biggest feast the father would ever throw in his whole life. You lose a son like this, and he comes back – this was the *greatest day* in the father’s LIFE!

So friends, what will it be for you? Happiness or Joy found in a close relationship with your loving God?

Compare the two. Happiness is pictured in the Party with friends. Empty beer cans strewn around. JOY is pictured in the Father’s welcoming embrace and his kiss. Joy is the fattened calf, the feast of a lifetime, and sharing it together with the Father, all the relatives, and the entire village!

The JOY God your Father gives, is WAY more than happiness can ever deliver!

So friends, when the world around you goes for happiness, dare to be different. Live for the joy of being with the Father, and loving your Savior, Jesus.

Amen.