

Pursuing Holiness Versus Pursuing Happiness

Steven G. Rise, PhD, LCSW-R

We live in a culture that is very happy-focused. While, in all my years, whenever I sought happiness for the sake of its pleasure, I always came up short. Human nature throughout the generations, across the span of every culture, prioritizes happiness as one of its initial pursuits. The only problem is our happy sensor is impossible to satisfy—it is like eating peanuts, insatiable. We always want a little bit more.

Happy is a relative statement, depending on where we are coming from in life. Even though we may feel dissatisfied with our limited possessions, eighty percent of the world would be happier if they were in our shoes. So, why do we typically find ourselves looking at the twenty percent who hold a better position in life, rather than the eighty percent who are less fortunate? We often count our blessings, but also quickly forget about them once our eyes become fixed on the latest object of desire.

Living in a consumer-based society does not help the problem it only perpetuates it. Commercials on the television, our neighbor's new and improved stuff, advertisements from other sources and many other temptations keep whispering into our ears, *"you need this product, you can always purchase it on credit and pay it off later"*. Pursuing happy is simply escapism from the realities of life. We receive a rush from buying new stuff, it does feel good, but the high does not last. *"He who dies with the most toys wins"* is a lie that distracts us from the truth, and from the things that matter the most in life. The truth is, the more stuff we have the more things we have to manage, maintain and pay for.

Materialism is a critical, foundational issue that has perpetuated incredible damage throughout our society, especially in every Christian home in America; and it has the most profound impact in the lives of our children. As Christians, we need to make sure our priorities are ones that please the Lord. What do you pursue? Stuff? More stuff? Newer stuff? Bigger stuff? We can easily see the pattern if we are willing to look at it. If we pursue happy, we will be more apt to justify impulsive spending and our need for immediate gratification, but stuff always becomes obsolete, worn out, old.

A recent study showed that when people have an anticipation of satisfaction over something they want, the level and degree of pleasure consistently fell short of their expectation, whether it was a new car, a larger home, a promotion at work or the ideal relationship. These things cannot satisfy the deeper needs within our souls. Only God can fill the void in our hearts that He designed and intended to be filled by Him.

Sometimes, we look for our happiness in our relationships, romance, and the euphoria of pursuing or of being pursued, or maybe in sensuality. This almost always falls short of our hopes because we fantasize of how *we* would like it to be; yet we often fail to consider the other persons needs, desires and anticipations. The pursuit of happy usually has a core of *selfishness*, which is the opposite of what God calls us to—*selflessness*.

When we pursue holiness, we want to be set apart from the world's aspirations. We instead yearn for the presence of Jesus Christ to be alive in our lives so that we can radiate His glory for God. Because He is the object of our desire, He meets all of our needs and throws happy in as a bonus! As we learn to keep our focus on Christ, who is seated at the right hand of God the Father, we maintain an eternal perspective that will radically change our perspective of life, and the expectations that we have. What has eternal value? What are the two things in life that do not rust and corrode? The human soul and God's Word, and they are the two things that God prioritizes. These are the two things worth investing our energy and resources into as well.

Happy versus joy and contentment.

As we prioritize *maintaining* an eternal, heavenly perspective, we keep looking up to the Lord and to His Word for the answers and guidance we need. When we do choose to look up, most of the temporal, peripheral issues, questions and concerns will usually fall into place on their own. Within this perspective also lies peace and contentment. We free up so much of our energy when we rest in God and trust in His sovereignty over our lives.

This is a step-by-step process, not one acquired over night. It is about investing our energies into the incremental growth of character by choosing faithfulness and truth as our reputation before our families and communities. Faithfulness and holiness both keep our eyes fixed on God, trusting Him with our lives as we live choice-by-choice, day-by-day, week-by-week, month-by-month, and year-by-year in our relationships and interactions with the people in our lives.

Furthermore, it is the solid legacy of faithfulness we choose to leave behind as our testimony to all who know us. Holiness and faithfulness have the ability to improve us as individuals through both good times and hard times. Our children unfailingly watch how we will respond to life circumstances, so we need to carefully consider the choices we make, the words we speak, the television shows we watch, you get my point—all of these expressions are the things we will be defined by.