

...that God Wouldn't Want Me to be Happy

Well good morning, hope you guys are doing well. If you have a bible, turn with me to Mark 10. We're gonna have to do some set-up first, but we will get there eventually. If you're with us for the first time this morning, we are in the middle of a series called *I Just Can't Believe* where we're making our way through some of the most common objections people tend to have when it comes to faith in Jesus. And truth be told, there are plenty of them out there. So far, we've talked about the relationship between faith and reason, we've discussed the issues people have with the authority of the bible, and then last week, Marcus walked us through the age old question of *if there is a God, why is there so much evil and suffering in the world we live in?* I personally thought Marcus did a fantastic job teaching that one, and by far one of my favorite parts of the teaching was that it wasn't me giving it. But if you missed any of those weeks, and especially if any of those questions are ones you've wrestled with *personally*, feel free go back and grab those online; hopefully those will be helpful to you.

Today though, we're moving on to *another* common objection people tend to have. The one we'll cover today, I think, is simultaneously the most widespread objection and also the hardest to spot. The objection we'll cover today goes something like this: "I just can't believe that God wouldn't want me to be happy." (Which by the way, is also the title of my forthcoming memoir about being a Tennessee football fan.) **It goes almost unquestioned in modern Western society that *the point of life is to be happy*.** For starters, it's enshrined forever in America's Declaration of Independence: "life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness." We see it in anywhere from Sheryl Crow back in the day, who said "if it makes you happy, it can't be that bad," to your mom/aunt/grandma who probably told you this week, "I just want you to do whatever makes you happy." The supreme pursuit in life, for an awful lot of people, is the pursuit of their own happiness. And we pursue it via all sorts of things: food, drink, romance, sex, money, power, career, substances—you name it, we've tried to squeeze at least some amount of happiness out of it. Blaise Pascal famously said:

All men seek happiness. This is without exception. Whatever different means they employ, they all tend to this end. The cause of some going to war, and of others avoiding it, is the same desire in both, attended with different views. The will never takes the least step but to this object. This is the motive of every action of every man, even of those who hang themselves.

I think he's very much onto something there. I don't know if you've ever noticed this, but even on a very personal, everyday kind of level, we spend nearly our entire lives searching for the next thing that might make us happy. It starts at a very early age: "I just can't wait until I start middle school—*then* I'll be happy." But then we start middle school and turns out it's quite horrible. So then it's "I can't wait until I'm in high school—*that'll* be the life." And then it turns out high school is only slightly less horrible than middle school. So then it's "I can't wait to get out of my parents' house and go to college—*then* I'll be happy." And then you get to college and college is pretty decent—but there's this annoying thing called *classes*. And you're always having to go to them, and prep for them, and study for them...so then you start thinking, "well once I graduate and get a real job—*then* I'll be happy." But then you get your first job and turns out adult life can get pretty monotonous and boring. So then it's "I can't wait until I get married. If there's *one thing* that I know will make me happy, it's inviting another human being into all my problems and issues—that sounds like pure *bliss*." But then that doesn't quite do it either. So it becomes "well I can't wait until I have kids. That's what my life really needs to be enjoyable: an infant that always needs me and never sleeps—*that'll* do it." And then it doesn't. So then it's "well maybe when we get the kids of the house." Or "maybe when we retire." And then you get the kids out of the house and retire and—this is no joke—rates of depression skyrocket among retired people. Do you see this? An awful lot of us spend the bulk of our adult lives waiting for the next thing that will make us happy. But we never quite seem to catch it. It's not that those things don't bring *any* happiness—they often do—they just never quite provide the *lasting* happiness we thought they would. But for most people, that doesn't discourage the pursuit of happiness one bit. We still believe, inherently—deep down in our heart of hearts—that happiness is *the point* of life itself.

And that mindset right there creates some problems for people when it comes to following Jesus. Because **the way of Jesus, if you're paying attention, contains some ideas and instructions that will occasionally interfere with your happiness.** For example, in Matthew 10:38, Jesus says, "...whoever does not take up their cross and follow me is not worthy of me." Just in case you didn't catch that, the "cross" Jesus is referring to there is a Roman *torture device*, the ancient equivalent of an electric chair or a lethal injection. Jesus says, "anyone who isn't prepared to face *that*, is not worthy of following me." Not exactly a sales pitch for happiness. Jesus says something similar in Luke 9:23. There he says: "If anyone would come after me, let him *deny himself* and take up his cross daily and follow me." *Deny myself?* That doesn't feel like it's going to contribute very much to my happiness. I was thinking something more like "*treat myself,*" not "*deny myself.*" So Jesus *all the time* says things like this about what it means to

follow him: things that sure don't sound like they jive all that much with our conception of happiness.

And so a lot of people, whether they've heard about these particular verses from the bible or not, just get the *feeling* that following Jesus is going to get in the way of their happiness. They've had enough conversations with enough Christians to gather that being a follower of Jesus isn't primarily about happiness. Whether their issue is with how God tells them to handle their money, or their relationships, or their sexuality, or their ethics in general—it just seems like *all of that* is going to get in the way of them being happy. And so **at a very functional level, this is the objection that some people have to faith: they just can't believe that God wouldn't want them to be happy.** Whether they articulate it that way or not, I think that is the barrier a lot of people encounter. This is what often leads people to reject Jesus.

Now, not everybody outright *walks away* from faith in Jesus because they think this way. In fact, a lot of self-proclaimed Christians choose to resolve the problem a little differently. What they'll do instead is just choose to *believe* in a *different version* of God who is a little more *on board* with their happiness. They'll start to believe in a "God" whose primary *desire is* to give us anything and everything they've ever wanted. And I'll just be real with you guys: there are plenty of pastors and authors out there who are eager to *help you* believe in that version of God. They'll be *glad* to help reinforce the version of God that exists primarily for your happiness. But here's what I want you to see: behind *that* version of God is **the exact same belief: that *the point of life is to be happy.* So if God is gonna be worth worshipping, he *also* needs to be about *my happiness.* Happiness is still in the driver's seat.**

Now, before we go any further and you get the *wrong* idea, I want to be clear that **I don't think happiness and Jesus are *always* at odds with one another.** I don't believe that, simply because I don't think that's the picture of God we get in the bible. The Psalms tell us at one point, "delight yourself in the Lord, and he will give you the desires of your heart." That verse doesn't quite mean what *Oprah* thinks it means, but it is still in the bible. And that sounds a lot like at least on some level, God is *for* our happiness, does it not? How about Psalm 4? It says, "You have put more joy in my heart than they have when their grain and wine abound." Have you ever been to a party where alcohol *abounds*? There's generally a good bit of joy at those parties. This verse says that it doesn't even compare to the joy that Jesus brings. (And don't get too hung up on the difference between happiness and joy—there's actually a good bit of overlap in the Bible

between those two ideas.¹) So Psalm 4 too would seem to indicate that God and happiness are not always enemies. I mean even *Jesus*—the guy who said pick up your cross, deny yourself, and follow me—*that guy? He also* says at one point in the gospels, “Ask, and you will receive, that your *joy may be full.*” *Full joy*—that seems like it probably has *something* to do with happiness, right? **So I don’t think it’s that God is always opposed to our happiness—in some ways, it would appear that he’s actually in favor of it.** ~~Now, our happiness isn’t his primary goal for us—his primary goal is to make us more like him. But he also knows that the more we become like him, the more joy and happiness we will find in him.~~

But here’s the distinction: I do think God approaches happiness a little differently than we do. He *thinks about it* a little differently than we do. And I want to try and point out some of that today from our passage in Mark 10—I told you we’d get there eventually. We’re going to read this story about an interaction Jesus has with a rich young man, who strikes up a conversation with him. So let’s pick it up starting in v. 17:

*[17] And as he was setting out on his journey, a man ran up and knelt before him and asked him, “Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit **eternal life?**”*

So this man asks Jesus the question, “What must I do to inherit *eternal life?*” That’s what he’s after. Now, we don’t know a *ton* about this guy’s background, so it’s hard to know what that phrase ‘eternal life’ means to him, exactly. But it’s probably safe to assume that it was some type of eternal, joyous, satisfied existence after death. He wants to ensure that he obtains *that*, by whatever means necessary. So he asks Jesus how he can make that happen. Take a look at Jesus’ response, v. 18:

*[18] And Jesus said to him, “Why do you call me good? **No one is good except God alone.** [19] **You know the commandments:** ‘Do not murder, Do not commit adultery, Do not steal, Do not bear false witness, Do not defraud, Honor your father and mother.’”*

So if you’re wondering, this basically is a lightning fast *overview* of the Old Testament law, which apparently the man in the story has some familiarity with. So think “Ten Commandments”: *don’t murder, don’t commit adultery, so on and so forth.* Jesus says

¹ For instance, the word “joy” in that passage can actually be translated “gladness.” In one passage in the bible it’s even as “happiness.”

‘that’s what you need to do if you want to inherit eternal life.’ To which the man replies, v. 20:

[20] *And he said to him, “Teacher, **all these I have kept from my youth.**”*

You *almost* get the feeling he had that one in his back pocket, ready to throw out there, don’t you? That’s a rather bold response. “Oh yeah, Jesus—I should’ve mentioned, I’ve kept all of the Old Testament law perfectly since I was a kid.” To most of *us*, that seems unlikely and at least a little self-righteous. But truthfully, we don’t know if he has or not. But Jesus doesn’t get hung up on all that—he just goes in for the kill. Look at v. 21:

[21] *And Jesus, looking at him, **loved him** [whatever you do, *please do not overlook* those two words right there: *Jesus **loved him***. It’s out of love for this guy that Jesus says what he’s about to say next], *and said to him, “You lack one thing: **go, sell all that you have and give to the poor, and [look at this phrase] you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me.**”**

Now, pay careful attention to the language Jesus uses here. **He tells this man that in order to experience eternal life—in order to experience this eternal, joyous existence with God—what he needs to do is sell everything he has, and give it to the poor.** Now, *one question* you might have is “why go after this guy’s *money*?” Jesus talks about money a lot, but he doesn’t bring it up with *every person* he meets. Jesus calls *plenty* of people to follow him, but he doesn’t tell all of them to sell *everything they have* in order to do it. So why single out *this guy’s money and possessions*? I think we can safely assume from the context of the passage that this guy’s money and possessions were a *very big deal* to him. **This guy didn’t just happen to be wealthy, his life was all about his wealth. It was everything to him.** It was what made life worth living. It was the source of his greatest joy and happiness in the world. Or, to use *Jesus’ language*, it was his “*treasure*.”

So, what Jesus tells him to do is *relocate* his *treasure*. To change, to *adjust*, to *shift* the thing he cares most about in this world, to be something *different* than it currently is. And the way for *this guy* to do *that* is by selling everything he has, and giving to the poor. If he does *that*, *then* he will have “*treasure in heaven*.” You see, **Jesus knows that there’s no use in someone being in heaven if their treasure is still on earth.** No use in being in heaven if the things that make you happiest in the world aren’t there, right? **So one way to read this is that Jesus is trying to take this guy’s happiness away**

from him. The *other way* to read it is that Jesus is trying to help this guy find a more *lasting source of happiness*.

So here's the incredibly *important* distinction we *have to get* when it comes to the relationship between God and our happiness: **God has a much deeper understanding of happiness than we do.** That's it. *That's* how the Bible can simultaneously say "take up your cross and follow Jesus," and "ask and you will receive, that your joy may be full." Because God *does care* about his people's happiness, but he has a much deeper understanding of it. In other words, God is not after *shallow, fleeting* happiness; he's after lasting, *soul-level* happiness. And those are actually different things. **Truth be told, there are times where immediate happiness gets in the way of lasting happiness.**

And here's the thing—we actually *get* this when it comes to other arenas of our lives. We inherently understand this concept. For example, very practically, just think for a second about the concept of *working out*. (Some of you are like "actually, I'd rather not." Well, just for a second—I didn't say you had to *do* it, just *think about* it.) For me to experience the truer, more lasting sense of happiness that comes from being healthy and fit and feeling better about myself on that front, I have to *forgo* the immediate happiness that would come from *never, ever* going to the gym under any circumstances because I hate that place. Right? *Or*, I have to forgo the immediate happiness that would come from spending that hour to just sit on my couch and watch Netflix. Sitting on my couch would make me infinitely more happy *momentarily*, but **if I want lasting happiness, I have to be willing to forgo some type of immediate happiness.**

We understand this when it comes to *eating healthy*. For instance, when I go to Chick-Fil-A (which just, by the way, has a better chicken sandwich than Popeyes, *just so we're all clear*). When I go to Chick-Fil-A, choosing to order a cobb salad with grilled chicken makes me *infinitely* less happy than ordering a deluxe fried chicken sandwich with pepper jack cheese, a large fry, a sugary lemonade, and a chocolate chip cookie. *Infinitely* less immediate happiness. But if I get the *salad* more often than I get the *fried chicken*, I might actually get to see my kids grow up *past* the age 25, which would make me very happy in the *long term*. Right? **In order to experience a more lasting happiness, I have to be willing to forgo a more immediate happiness.**

We get this in *some ways* when it comes to saving *money*. All of us just inherently know, that in order to *have* more money *later*, we need to *save* more money *now*. If I want my family to go on a vacation next summer, I have to be willing to spend less money on

Chick-Fil-A *right now*, so that we can save up for it. **If I want a *better* happiness, I have to be willing to forgo a *lesser* happiness.**

Do you see this? We all inherently get how this works. Now, I'm not saying we're all always successful at *applying* these principles—that's a whole different teaching, right? But I *am* saying that we all at least inherently understand the *principle*—the *idea*—that at times, **in order to experience more truer, more lasting form of happiness, we may have to forgo a more temporary, momentary happiness.** We understand that this is how it often works.

But for whatever reason, we find it hard to transfer that mentality to *other* arenas of our life. It seems like anytime God suggests that we might delay some form of temporary happiness, we are immediately *skeptical* about it. We're like "ahhh, I don't know—sounds like God is trying to take something from me." For instance, ~~when the Scriptures teach that sex should be reserved for the context of marriage, it's so hard for a lot of us to even consider that God might have a good reason for telling us to do that. When the Scriptures teach us to be *radically generous* with our money—leveraging it for the kingdom and for others in need, rather than just buying newer or better things for ourselves—we have such a hard time understanding why they would call us to that. Or, when the Scriptures insist that we work *through* conflict with other followers of Jesus, rather than checking out on them or ghosting them at the first sign of tension, we find that so difficult to get on board with. **When it comes to all these *other* arenas of our life, we have such a hard time believing that there could be a greater happiness available as a result of forgoing lesser happiness.** But Jesus, because he loves us, often *insists* that we pursue a deeper level of happiness. Just like he does for the guy in this story. He's not *against* this guy's happiness, he's actually *for* it. He just wants a better version of it for him.~~

And remember, from the passage, *why* it tells us that Jesus says this to the man. It's because he *loved* him. His love for this guy is what prompted these instructions. How many of you have discovered that sometimes, in order to *love* someone, you have to tell them things they won't necessarily like? Most of us with a pulse have realized that, I think. But just in case you don't believe me, let me prove it to you. I was thinking about it because I just saw in the news where American Idol was holding auditions in Knoxville last week. I guarantee you, if you watch the first round of auditions when they put them on TV, what you will see is person after person who did not have friends who loved them enough to tell them something they didn't want to hear. Namely, that they should never sing publicly under any circumstances. *Sometimes*, truly loving someone involves telling

them things they don't want to hear. Sometimes, it looks like being on more on that person's team than *they are* at the moment.

And really, that's the perspective Jesus takes in this story. He's on this guy's *team*. In fact, he's more on his team than the guy himself is. But being on this guy's team involves telling him something he won't necessarily like. Telling him that to find the true happiness that he's after, he's going to have to trade in his temporary, lesser happiness first. That's the offer made to the man in the story. And unfortunately, the man in the story rejects that offer. Take a look at the last verse, in v. 22:

[22] *Disheartened by the saying, he went away sorrowful, for he had great possessions.*

He walks away sad, at least in part, because his *immediate* happiness via the stuff he owns matters more to him than the *eternal* happiness Jesus offers. **He rejects Jesus because in *his mind*, Jesus stands in the way of his happiness.**

Now that right there is a story that a lot of us have seen far too often, is it not? Many of us have seen that sequence of events play out so many different ways with so many different people: someone can't understand how Jesus could ask them to give something up that they love, and so they walk away from Jesus. And if I could be honest with you guys for a second, here's my *fear*. My fear is that some of us in this room may have walked away from Jesus already and don't even realize it. My fear is that some of us have so *re-invented* God to be someone who never opposes the things that make us happy, that we don't even realize we walked away from the *real* Jesus a long time ago. My fear is that some of us would call ourselves Christians, but we no longer let God even touch certain areas of our lives—and we've somehow convinced ourselves that that is a functional relationship with God. But it's not.

Jesus does *care* about our happiness. He's not a blind *cheerleader* for it. He's not going to immediately get behind whatever it is we think we need in any given *moment*. But at the same time, he *is* about you finding true joy and true happiness and true satisfaction in him. That's what he wanted for the guy in the story, and that's what he wants for us too. This guy was just unwilling to believe that. And sometimes *we* are unwilling to believe that. One of the saints back in the day was known for saying that *sin* is the unwillingness to trust that God wants our deepest happiness.²

² This is paraphrased from St. Ignatius of Loyola.

Now, in order to get at this idea from a slightly different angle, I want us to look at one other passage, this one from Matthew 13, v. 44. You can turn there, we'll also put it on the screen, since it's just one verse. This time we're not looking at an actual interaction Jesus has with someone, but rather a *hypothetical* story that he tells. But in many ways, this story is the *inverse* of the story we just read about the rich young ruler. **It's a story about someone who faces a very similar situation, but has the exact opposite response.** Take a look with me at v. 44:

*The kingdom of heaven is like **treasure** hidden in a field, which a man found and covered up. Then **in his joy** he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field.*

So it's pretty easy to see the connections between this verse and the passage we just read. This is a story about a man who is faced with the same *situation* as the rich young ruler—to sell everything he has—but he responds the opposite way. *This guy* goes and sells *everything he has*, in order to buy this field. Rids himself of every item he owns. This guy goes Marie Kondo, but with a twist: he gets rid of *everything* he owns, so that he can *get* the one thing that sparks joy in him. But seriously, don't miss *how* he goes about it: the story says he does all of this "*in his joy*." Not reluctantly, not under *compulsion*, but out of a sheer overflow of *joy* in his heart. So similar predicament, but the opposite response as the rich young ruler.

So this begs the question, *what is the difference?* What's the difference between the man in *this* story, and the rich man Jesus interacts with in the *other* passage? What causes one of them to *joyfully give up* everything they have, and the other to walk away *sad*, with their possessions still intact? What's the difference here?

I think **the difference is in what they think they're gaining.** It's in how they perceive the value of what they're *getting* as a result of all this. You see, for the *rich young ruler*, all he can see is *his* money and his possessions. All he can see is the things that make him happiest in the world, no longer belonging to him anymore. All he can see is what he will *lose* by selling all of it. But the man in Matthew 13, all *he* can see is what he's *gaining* by selling everything he has. In his mind's eye, *the most important thing is the treasure hidden in that field.* Such that for him, selling all that he has to get it is a *no-brainer*. It's a very simple decision because he will gain so much more than he loses. And Jesus says "that's what life in the kingdom of God is about." **It's about understanding that you gain far more than you will ever have to lose. It's about finding more worth, more**

value, in Jesus and his kingdom than you do in the things that bring happiness in the here and now.

Because **when you become a follower of Jesus, one very important thing that happens is that your happiness ceases to be solely dependent upon your circumstances.** It is not dependent upon how much money you make or what job you have or who you date or *if* you marry—it's no longer dependent upon *any* of those things. **You still can *enjoy* those things and *participate* in those things, but you no longer *need* them to provide ultimate happiness for you.** Because in Jesus, you've *found* the treasure in the field. What the guy in Matthew 13 is communicating by his actions is that he is content having *nothing else*, if it means he gets God.

So what we're saying when we claim to follow Jesus is that Jesus is enough for me, even if I *don't* get into that college I wanted to go to. We're saying that Jesus is enough for me, even if I *never* meet that perfect person.. We're saying that Jesus is enough, even if we never get married. Even if we *don't* graduate with honors. Even if we *don't* get that job we've always wanted. Even if we don't rise to the very top of the ladder in our career. Even if we *don't* get the 2.5 kids and the white picket fence. We're saying that Jesus is enough, even if none of those things we want to happen, happen. **Because—listen—our joy and our life is not found in our circumstances, but in the death and resurrection of Jesus on our behalf.** *That* is what makes life worth living for us.

And listen—don't hear me wrong—it's not that any of those things are *bad* things. Not at all. **It's not that we don't *pursue* those things if God is calling us to pursue them. It's just that we don't operate as if our happiness is *dependent* upon them.** They are not *required* for us to think that life is worth living. **When you come across a follower of Jesus, what you are seeing is *not* a person who has stopped caring about their own happiness.** That's not it. It might appear that way from a distance, but that's not it. **What you're *seeing* is a person who has found a truer, more *lasting* source of happiness in Jesus and his kingdom.** You're witnessing a person who has *found* the treasure in the field.

So what I'd love is for a lot of us in this room today to move from the response of the *rich young ruler*, to the response of the guy who found the treasure in the field. No doubt some of us have rejected Jesus—or at least rejected the *real* Jesus—because we think he has *asked too much* of us. He's asked something of us that we aren't willing to give up. And so maybe as a response, we have also “walked away sad.” We've decided that it's

not worth *that*. So if I could offer you one thing to chew on today, it would be this: **that Jesus is actually offering you more than he's asking you to give up.** He *is* going to ask you to give some things up—that's for certain. That *will* happen. And some of them very well may be *major, significant* things—things that you love. Things you don't want to let go of at all. But what he's *offering you* is the treasure in the field. The thing you cannot find anywhere else. What he's offering you is *him and his kingdom*.

Now, on that note, one last very important thing before we're done. I don't want any of us to think that the message of Jesus is "give things up, so that you can get something better." That's an *outworking* of his message—it's a *reponse to it*—but that's not the message *itself*. **The message of Jesus is not first about *our* sacrifice, but rather *his* sacrifice.** In Hebrews 12, the author is writing about "casting aside every weight that hinders us"—in other words, very much what Jesus was inviting the rich young ruler to do in the story. But the passage also puts in no uncertain terms *why* we do that. It says that our motivation is "Jesus, who for the *joy set before him*, endured the cross." **Jesus' own pursuit of joy led him to give up more than any of us ever will: he gave up the comforts of heaven, the unbroken relationship with his Father, he gave up his honor, his dignity, and ultimately his life in the most brutal kind of way.** Jesus did all *that*, for the *joy set before him*. I think one thing that tells us is that there is something far deeper than surface-level, fleeting, shallow *happiness*. There is something far more important than whatever makes us happiest in the moment. There is a joy available to us that is *worth* suffering the loss of all things for.

And for Jesus, do you know what that joy was? It was *us*. It was you and me. It was knowing that through losing everything, he could purchase *us* out of our sin and into his kingdom. And listen—that's true regardless of who you are, what you've done, what you came in here struggling with—that's true of you wherever you're at this morning. Jesus did that for you—it doesn't *matter* how ill-deserving you might feel like you are of it. In fact, that's kind of the *point*: how ill-deserving we *all* are of it. For Jesus, it was *still* worth anything he had to give up. And so that's precisely what he did, for us. **And Jesus doing that is precisely what makes *our* joy possible. It's what makes it possible for *us* to experience something far better than temporary happiness.**

So if you want to experience something better than waiting for the next thing in life to make you happy, that's where it starts. *Without* that as your guide, it will never make sense why you might give up something that brings you happiness. But when you worship a savior who gave up the joys of heaven to experience pain, suffering, and loss, because of what he *could gain through it*, it all starts to make a little more sense why we

would give up things as well. **Jesus sought something *better* than momentary happiness, and so we do too.**

Let's pray.