

The Pursuit of Joy 09-02-18 AM

In the American declaration of independence there is a statement that has become a way of life in the US: "Life, Liberty and the pursuit of happiness". Pursuing happiness is an obsession in our culture (and many others). But what is happiness? The word itself means *fortunate happenstance*; in other words, "good luck". Happiness refers to the situation or circumstances that we are in being positive. Therefore, seeking happiness is a pursuit of "good luck". And the very obvious point is this: It does not work.

Viktor Frankl was a Jewish psychologist and psychiatrist in Austria in the 1930s. He was particularly focused on treating depression. When the Nazi Germans took over Austria, he and his family were moved first to a ghetto, then ultimately to a concentration camp. When he emerged in 1945, his parents, his wife, his children and all but one sibling were dead. This profound experience (and the experience of treating others in camps who were suicidal) provoked him to write (in just nine days!) a book that in the U.S. is entitled *Man's Search for Meaning*. The US Library of Congress named it one of the ten most influential books in the U.S..

Frankl made some important observations. First was this: *"Everything can be taken from a man but one thing -- the last of the human freedoms -- to choose one's attitude in any given set of circumstances, to choose one's own way."* Indeed, like Job, he had all taken from him; like Job, only his attitude was left in his possession. When he observed who was able to overcome such things (and those who could not), he wrote *"He (who) knows the "why" for his existence will be able to bear almost any "how."* Notice it had nothing to do with happiness; sometimes happiness is completely missing in life. To this he pointed out *"it is a characteristic of the American culture that, again and again, one is commanded and ordered to 'be happy.' But happiness cannot be pursued; it must ensue. One must have a reason to 'be happy.'"* Finally, he made this important observation: *"It is the very pursuit of happiness that thwarts happiness."*

Perhaps it is all summed up like this: You CANNOT always have happiness, but you CAN always have purpose, and purpose brings JOY. Therefore, it is possible to always have joy. Purpose is the only way one can have joy.

Let's jump to Matthew 5:3-12. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus begins with what we call the beatitudes. The words He used are particularly interesting, as the word for "blessed" literally means "happy" or "fortunate". But what is so unusual is that the things Jesus ties to that good luck are not things we think are good luck. Consider these statements like this:

"You are happy if you are poor in spirit...."

"You are happy if you mourn..."

"You are happy if you are humble..."

"You are happy if you are merciful..."

"You are happy if you are timid or meek..."

"You are happy if you are pure..."

"You are happy if you are one who make peace..."

"You are happy if you are persecuted..."

In this application, Jesus words almost fail to make sense. But to His audience, these were condition and lifestyles that they all practiced; very likely none of them thought that they were happy for doing it. But Jesus was speaking not to the concept of happiness, that empty pursuit, but to joy. You cannot always have happiness, but even when you suffer or mourn or are weak, you can have joy.

Consider these passages on joy and how they all speak to the concept of purpose. Hebrews 12:2 says that Jesus saw through the pain to the joy. His joy was in His purpose: satisfaction of pleasing God and the satisfaction of glorifying God. James 1:2 speaks to having joy in trials. James calls us to see the purpose of trials, which is the joy of being perfected before God. 1 Peter 1:8 says that we can have joy in not seeing God. In this case the purpose is faith, and the obstacle is doubt. Purpose permits us to see through doubt to the reality of God, and thereby obtaining in faith inexpressible joy. 2 Timothy 1:4 Paul describes his great joy in being with the saints. We are to make fellow Christians a part of the purpose of our life. IF we do, then like Paul we have joy in being with the saints. Gathering together for many is a burden, and it is because they have missed seeing this as a purpose. Likewise in Philippians 4:1 there is joy in encouraging others. People who have a purpose in faith, in pleasing God, in being with and encouraging other Christians have a greater joy than any other people on earth.

You cannot always have happiness, but you can always have joy. Even if you could find happiness, worldly happiness is not satisfying. If you want joy you must find purpose. There is no joy without purpose.