



ELIZABETHTOWN
CHURCH OF THE BRETHREN

PRACTICING PEACE, SERVICE AND OPENNESS TO ALL

*D'you know what makes
me happy?*

James 2.1–16

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PART 1—WHAT MAKES YOU HAPPY?

A Sermon in Three Parts

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I saw a poll the other day that asked people what they thought their purpose in life was. Why are we here? The leading answer...any guesses????...Happiness. I was placed on this earth to seek happiness.

That might sound shallow, but in fairness that doesn't mean that they don't do unpleasant tasks. They take out the trash because it would not be a happy thing to live in a dump. They have difficult conversations with loved ones because those conversations will better the relationship, which will lead to greater happiness. Even in a theological framework they might say that God desires us to be happy.

And after all, even Aristotle said that, "Happiness is the meaning and the purpose of life, the whole aim and end of human existence."

AND IN THE PURSUIT OF HAPPINESS

So we pursue things that make us feel happy, if even for only a moment. But here's where we can go astray.

- We buy stuff thinking that will make us happy. Who doesn't get that little flutter of excitement when you see the Amazon package on your front porch, or go to the mall or flea market get *something*.
- We go on vacations thinking a break from reality will make us happy. But all that does is suspend reality for a brief while.
- We binge on decadent foods, or drink because that feels good in the moment. But we know that, too, is fleeting.

And I'm no Scrooge, these things have their place. But can any of them really make us happy? No, and in fact they might make us even less happy. As Dean Karnazes says, "We have become so comfortable, we're miserable."

2 Happiness studies tell us that once we humans have the basics—food, water, shelter, security—the happiest people are those who have a purpose. It’s not a bank account, sunshine days, etc.

Ralph Waldo Emerson says that *“The purpose of life is not to be happy. It is to be useful, to be honorable, to be compassionate, to have it make some difference that you have lived and lived well.”*

All of this led me to seek Biblical advice on the subject of and what we think of as happiness and what I found was....not much. But where I was led was James 2.

PART 2—JAMES 2

You know, sometimes preachers have to work hard to take a scripture that is vague, and plumb it’s depths, analyze the ancient linguistic political roots, study the socio-economics culture and practices of the days. And then try to figure out how to make that understandable to a present-day congregation through examples and illustrations. The scripture from James is not one of those difficult scriptures. It’s very straightforward.

JAMES 2.1—10

My brothers and sisters, do you with your acts of favoritism really believe in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ? For if a person with gold rings and in fine clothes comes into your assembly, and if a poor person in dirty clothes also comes in, and if you take notice of the one wearing the fine clothes and say, ‘Have a seat here, please’, while to the one who is poor you say, ‘Stand there’, or, ‘Sit at my feet’, have you not made distinctions among yourselves, and become judges with evil thoughts? Listen, my beloved brothers and sisters. Has not God chosen the poor in the world to be rich in faith and to be heirs of the kingdom that he has promised to those who love him? But you have dishonored the poor. Is it not the rich who oppress you? Is it not they who drag you into court? Is it not they who blaspheme the excellent name that was invoked over you?

You do well if you really fulfill the royal law according to the scripture, ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ But if you show

partiality, you commit sin and are convicted by the law as transgressors. For whoever keeps the whole law but fails in one point has become accountable for all of it.

In the last months we have talked about faith. What faith is, and is not. True faith is not buying into a prescribed set of beliefs. We saw in Hebrews 11. *Faith is the assurance of things hoped for; the conviction of that not yet seen.* Faith is trust in God. And today, we read that true faith is faith that loves our neighbors and is willing to work.

What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if you say you have faith but do not have works? Can faith save you? If a brother or sister is naked and lacks daily food, and one of you says to them, ‘Go in peace; keep warm and eat your fill’, and yet you do not supply their bodily needs, what is the good of that? So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead.

In other words, if we truly have faith, the world will know it not by our pious the words are that come out of our mouths, but by how we act and serve. Not long ago Pastor Jason told the children of one of the old Brethren who was once asked if he was a Christian. His reply was along these lines “I could tell you that I am a Christian. But if you really want to know, you should go and ask my neighbors.”

Faith without works is dead. Service to others shows not only that we have faith, but living faith.

PART 3—WHY DO YOU GET OUT OF BED IN THE MORNING?

Why do you get out of bed in the morning? What feeds your spirit? What satisfies your soul? What makes your heart sing? I’m guessing it’s not the stuff you have, the vacations you’ve been on, or the words that come out of your mouth.

On the cover of your bulletins is a picture of a Brethren Volunteer Service worker Esther Miller. She is serving in Suchitoto, El Salvador at the Center for Art and Peace. She’s doing what many from our congregation, younger and older, have also done, giving a year or more to live their faith in

4 service. I have worked with hundreds of BVsers over the years and I don't think I've ever heard anyone say "You know, that year of serving others was a big mistake."

This is Joan and Phil Taylor. They were in the corporate world for decades in the Washington, DC area, raised three kids and retired, and thought *Now what?* As people of faith they decided they really wanted to live their faith, and make a difference. And so they, too, entered Brethren Volunteer Service, and they stuck—for about 10 years! Moving from place to place, even internationally. They don't romanticize their experience—it has had highs and lows, but they are happy. I want to be like Joan and Phil when I grow up.

Obviously, you don't have to commit a year or 10 to Brethren Volunteer Service to live a life of service. We all know people who live their faith in service to others every single day. Some amazing examples are right here in this room. People who serve the poor, lend a hand to their neighbors, travel distances to rebuild homes, give finances sacrificially, pray for the broken, organize a blood drive, give blood (and by the way it's not too late—I'll meet you out there in a few minutes). Those who teach Sunday school, prepare the building for worship, Elizabethtown College's motto is "Educate for Service," and of course the many who live their careers as service to others.

And I'm guessing this service makes them happy. But as people of faith, that's not why they do it. They do it because... Jesus did it first. You see a basin and towel on the screen. That is the reason we strive to "practice peace, SERVICE, and openness to all."

At the Last Supper, the day before Jesus was executed, just hours before his arrest, Jesus was eating with his disciples when he got up from the table, put a towel around his waist, poured water into a basin, and went to each washing their feet. An act of service. This is the way of faith. It exemplifies of a life of faith in service, even to the cross.

And so I'll end where I began...what makes you happy?

