

Emotions in the Christian Life

Sunday School Class
Trinity Baptist Church

Part Five: Happiness and Joy in the Christian Life (G275 – Tune G39)
Ps. 149: 2

Introduction

- Just as human beings have been equipped to experience a range of negative or painful emotions (e.g., anger, fear, anxiety, sadness, depression, jealousy, shame, guilt, remorse, etc.), so we have been equipped to experience a range of positive emotions
- Today we'll try to gain a better understanding of positive emotions—their nature, their function, their causes, and their place in the life of the Christian

Identifying positive emotions

- Those who study positive emotions distinguish among a number of categories:
 - Those associated with the past:
 - Satisfaction
 - Contentment
 - Fulfillment
 - Pride
 - Serenity
 - Those associated with the future:
 - Optimism
 - Hope
 - Confidence
 - Faith
 - Trust
 - Those associated with the present:
 - Pleasures:
 - Momentary sensory pleasures:
 - Beautiful smells
 - Delicious flavours
 - Higher pleasures arising from more complex activities
 - Bliss
 - Glee
 - Comfort
 - Ecstasy
 - Ebullience
 - Gratifications (states of absorption or flow which involve using our unique strengths)

- Those associated with personal/social relationships:
 - Love (erotic, brotherly, filial, parental, etc.)
 - Affection
 - Tenderness
 - Belonging/affiliation
 - Thankfulness/gratitude
- Taken together, these positive emotions form what we generally refer to as the feeling of “happiness” (though this can be problematic)

Why did God create us with the capacity for positive emotions?

- God made us in His own image—in our capacity to experience positive emotions we see a pale reflection of the infinite happiness of God (cf. J. Piper)
 - God rejoices and experiences gladness in doing good (Dt. 30: 9; Zeph. 3:17; Jer. 32: 40-41)
 - God delights in his Son (Isa. 42: 1; Mat. 3: 17)
 - God rejoices in his work (Ps. 104: 31)
 - God takes pleasure in those who fear him (Ps. 147: 10-11)
 - God delights in mercy, justice and righteousness (Jer. 9: 24)
 - God is pleased by what he does (Ps. 115: 3)
 - He is “forever blessed” (2 Cor. 11: 31)
 - God loves (Jn. 3: 16; 1 Jn. 4: 16)
 - Jesus “rejoiced in the holy spirit” (Lk. 10: 21)
 - Jesus went to the cross for the joy set before him (Heb. 12: 2)
- For our good:
 - Whereas negative emotions motivate avoidant or self-protective behavior, positive emotions promote “approach behavior” (e.g., exploration, growth, productivity, achievement, creativity, affiliation, persistence, problem-solving, etc.)
 - Happy, optimistic people experience greater longevity
- For God’s glory
 - Positive emotions can motivate worship, and praise of God
 - Positive emotions can motivate efforts toward God-honoring works of obedience, witness, righteousness, holiness, etc.

What is happiness?

- Happiness refers to positive feelings of pleasure or contentment arising in the context of desirable personal circumstances (real or perceived)

What factors contribute to human happiness according to science?

- Genetically-based personality traits
 - Extraversion, optimism, high self-esteem, internal locus of control

- Note: heritability of a happiness “set-point” (i.e., the stable point around which people’s mood varies over long periods of time) – about 98%
- Cultural factors
 - Living in a stable democracy without political oppression and military conflict
 - Social equality
 - Individualist cultures (vs. collectivist)
 - Welfare states, and countries where public institutions run efficiently
- Married people happier than non-married (least happy are those trapped in unhappy marriages)
 - Note: happy people have happier, more satisfactory marriages (longitudinal research)
- Close supportive family relationships (i.e., parents, siblings, extended family members)
- Maintaining a few close, confiding relationships
- Involvement in religious activity—why?
 - Coherent belief system that enables people to find meaning in their lives and to make sense of adversities in life
 - Social support
 - Physically and psychologically healthier lifestyles (i.e., marital fidelity, altruistic behaviour, moderation in eating and drinking, commitment to hard work)
- Wealth
 - Particularly when view self as better-off than others
- Geography
 - Natural vs. artificial environments
 - Good weather –i.e., sunny, warm (not too warm), low humidity
 - Quality of housing
 - Music
- Exercise
- Health (note, no correlation when objective ratings of health)
- Employed
- Education
- Achievement of highly-valued goals
- Rest, relaxation, good food, leisure activities

What factors contribute to happiness according to the Bible?

- Those who revere and respect (i.e., “fear”) the Lord (Ps. 128: 1-2)
- Those who keep God’s revealed laws (Prov. 29: 18; Jn. 13: 17)
- Those who have children (Ps. 127: 3-5)
- Those whose behavior is in line with their conscience (Rom. 14: 22)
- Those who trust in God (Prov. 16: 20)
- Those who find godly wisdom (Prov. 3:13)
- Those identified in Jesus’ beatitudes (Mat. 5: 1-11)
- Godliness with contentment (1 Tim. 6: 6)

Principle: Biblical happiness is not something that can or should be pursued in and of itself—it is something that flows as a natural by-product from a loving, trusting, obedient relationship with God.

Happiness versus Joy

- Does God want us to be happy?
 - Scripture does not enjoin believers to be happy all the time—rather it prescribes attitudes and actions which, when obeyed, will generally lead to happiness
 - On the other hand, most Christians, if honest, will acknowledge to not feeling happy all the time—we can't honestly sing:
I'm in-right out-right up-right down-right happy all the time
Since Jesus Christ came in and took away my sin
 - The Bible, church history and our own experience point to the reality of pain, sadness, fear, anger, disappointment, tears in the lives of Christian people (vs. the health, wealth and prosperity gospel)
 - Happiness is not necessarily God's will for his people at all times
- By contrast, the Bible is crystal clear that God's redeemed people are to be characterized by joy—defined as:
 - A profound and ubiquitous inner sense of exultant gladness, peace, well-being (or other positive emotion) that is independent of temporal circumstances, but is instead rooted in a deep and abiding faith in God, and which manifests in (sometimes superficially incongruous) outward expressions of gratitude, worship, and delight (cf. Apostles in Acts 5: 41; Paul and Silas in prison in Acts 16)
- Joy is a fruit of faith
 - Joy is depicted in scripture as a natural outcome of fellowship with God (Ps. 16:11)
 - Joy is evoked in the hearts of believers in response to the attributes and works of God:
 - His holy name (Ps. 97: 12)
 - His mercy and lovingkindness (Ps. 21: 6,7; Ps. 31: 7)
 - His salvation (Ps. 21: 1; Isa. 25: 9—1 Pet. 1: 3-9)
 - His judgments (Ps. 48: 11)
 - His words of comfort (Jer. 15: 15-16)
 - His sovereignty and his justice (Ps. 98: 4-9)
 - The advent of Messiah and the gospel (Lk. 2: 10)
 - Joy is a fruit of the Spirit (Gal. 5:22)—one that does not depend on external circumstances (Phil. 2: 17-18)
 - Joy is an essential mark of the kingdom of God (Rom. 14: 17)
 - Joy was a defining characteristic of the early church (Acts. 2: 44-47)
 - Principle: A joyless Christian is a contradiction in terms—a deep and abiding joy is a defining characteristic of Christ followers (Joy is the flag)
- However, joy is not just a fruit of faith, it is also a work of obedience (one of the good works for which we are created: cf. Eph. 2: 10)—the Bible repeatedly

commands Christians to be joyful (i.e., to rejoice, to be glad, sing for joy, etc.) (e.g., summed up in Phil. 4: 4)

- How do we obey this command?
 - We must make the “choice to rejoice”
 - In times of pain, sadness, hardship or fear, praise Him for his faithfulness, his wise and loving providences, his salvation—choose to view difficulty for what it is—God’s work in refining and perfecting your faith (Jas. 1: 2-4)
 - Come to corporate worship with a God-centred focus—and come with the agenda of encountering truth that will thrill your heart—look for something to praise and thank God for in every song sung, in every prayer offered, in every sermon preached, in every scripture read
 - In corporate worship, participate with gusto and enthusiasm—don’t worry if you don’t feel like it, do it anyway—the feeling will follow (note regarding the pace of hymns!)
 - Make a practice in your private scripture reading of finding at least one truth for which you can praise and thank God—and then immediately do so—and repeat all day!
 - In private prayer, meditate on the attributes and on the work of God
 - Cultivate an “attitude of gratitude” by thanking God in (for?) every circumstance of life (cf. Phil. 4: 6-7)
- Why does God command us to rejoice?—our good and his glory!

Summary

- Human emotions—both negative and positive—are a gift from God which, like all his gifts, are given for our good and for God’s glory
- Painful emotions are given as a means of motivating self-protection
- Positive emotions give us pleasure and motivate a range of “approach” behavior (i.e., exploration, creativity, affiliation, procreation, etc.)
- Sometimes in the providence of God, and perhaps partly as a result of sinful choices or attitudes (our own or other people’s), we may suffer from disorders of painful emotions (e.g., anxiety, anger, depression) or pleasurable emotions (e.g., addictions).
- These disorders can be used by God to drive us away from dependence on self into a relationship of total dependence on him
- Happiness reflects positive emotion arising from a range of desirable circumstances
- The Bible teaches that happiness is a by-product of an obedient, trusting relationship with God
- Joy is a positive emotion rooted not in circumstances but in faith.
- It is fruit or an identifying mark of authentic faith
- Joy is also an act of obedience—we must learn to cultivate it to the praise of his glorious grace the honor of his name!