

The Safety Net

National Church Growth Research Center

P. O. Box 368 · Mt. Hood OR 97041 · 541-352-7636 · sishot@aol.com · www.liftedhands.org

Silas Shotwell, Regional Director

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“A Better Perspective”

Dear ones,

I received a lot of response last month from my letter on happiness. The majority agreed that sourpuss Christianity and frowning church leadership has hindered the cause of Christ.

The whole discussion was prompted by a reference to a class at Harvard University that has become the most popular class on campus. I miss-named it in my April letter. I called it “Practical Psychology,” but it is actually called “Positive Psychology.” It is taught by a Jewish professor, Dr. Tal Ben-Shahar. I have not had the privilege of taking his class but I have read and reread his book, *THE QUESTION OF HAPPINESS*. It is a small, but fascinating book.

He argues that true happiness comes from finding a blend of meaning and pleasure in life. He talks about the “ultimate currency” of life, which is not money or fame, but those things that give joy and significance to each individual.

The principles he discusses certainly seem to be Biblical. I see illustrations in scripture in instances like Paul and Silas’s singing at midnight in a Philippian jail cell, after having been arrested and flogged. I’ve always thought they were singing, “Joy to the world, the Lord is come” rather than “Nobody knows the trouble I’ve seen.”

And then, months later, Paul writes the Philippians from a Roman imprisonment and urges them to “Rejoice in the Lord always, and again I say Rejoice.”

How did he do that? He was no masochist, but had evidently found meaning and purpose in what he was doing, no matter what. His perspective pervaded over his affliction.

And there’s the key. . . . a better perspective.

While in Los Angeles recently, a friend told a story about another friend of his. The other friend was concerned that he had been neglecting his 12-year-old son. So he sought something that he and his son could do together. They decided to build a remote-controlled airplane.

It took weeks to build the plane. In spare moments, evenings, and weekends, the father/son team crafted a beautiful aircraft. They were proud of their work, and even more proud of the quality time they had spent together.

Then came the day to fly the plane. They went to a place where such things were done on a regular basis. The boy wanted to work the controls. The father stepped away several paces so he could get a better view. The boy took the remote, started the plane, and taxied it down the cement slab that other dads and boys had built for a runway.

The plane was quickly airborne and was a wonder to behold. The boy took it in circles and then executed a beautiful barrel roll. And then another, slightly bigger than the previous one. As the barrel rolls continued and got bigger and bigger, the dad panicked. But before he could get the boy's attention, the plane CRASHED and broke into countless pieces. The dad was devastated and started running toward the boy, wondering what to say.

He decided he would simply say, "Son, I'm so sorry it crashed!"

But when he got to the boy, he noticed that his son had a huge smile on his face. And the boy, before the dad could say anything, blurted out: "Dad, did you see how well our plane flew?"

Too many of us focus on the crashes, rather than the accomplishments.

It gets down to the fact that real happiness is not caused by circumstances but by choices.

When I was a young minister someone gave me the book PSYCHO-CYBERNETICS by Maxwell Maltz. I read it, but didn't read it enough. Maltz contended that in each of us there is an internal thermostat that controls our happiness level. He contended that most people don't make many real adjustments through their lifetimes. Some events raise or lower the happiness level for a brief time, but not for long.

Maltz argued that one could increase their happiness level by consciously making choices in that direction over a lifetime. I really believe that is true.

Most of the church leaders I talk to are not happy in their work. They would often contend that it would be impossible for them to be happy because of other people and circumstances that have made them miserable.

I'm certainly not minimizing the fact that ministry is often difficult. Neither would I argue that elders, other staff members, and members of churches, can make things more pleasant or more difficult.

But, having said that, I still believe that one's personal choices and attitudes are the ultimate factor in finding joy. It helps tremendously to view things from a heavenly perspective. That involves some practical choices that we make. So, in that light, I make the following suggestions:

1. Stop griping. The Biblical term is “murmuring.” It is a mindset that keeps a person from seeing anything but problems.
2. Stop blaming. It is much easier to point out someone else’s deficiencies than to see our own. Shooting “the other woman” will not solve the reasons someone strayed in the first place.
3. Stop judging. If someone in the church is not doing right, God will deal with it. We have little business trying to do it for Him.
4. Be thankful. I’ve recently seen some people gain a completely different perspective by thanking God for others instead of demonizing them.

I really do believe that happiness is ultimately up to us. The choices we make determine the nature of our world. That may be a hard pill to swallow, but I think we’ll start improving when we do it.

How about trying it for 30 days? Let May be “new attitude month.”

Ask God to open your eyes and give you a better perspective. Ask Him to help you view your adversaries with the love and patience He has for them. Turn loose of petty things that you might have blown out of proportion. Thank God for His providence and discipline.

- Read Philippians 4, and be thankful that you’re not in prison.
- Read Hebrews 10 and be thankful that you haven’t shed any blood yet.
- Find out that smiles take less facial muscles than frowns.
- Take some deep breaths.
- Give some slack.
- Relax.

You might be surprised how the world changes before your very eyes.

God bless you,
Silas