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UNDERSTANDING THAT JOY MIGHT NOT MEAN HAPPINESS

By Jim Mathis

The United States' Declaration of Independence says that every person should have the right to pursue happiness. This does not guarantee, however, that we should expect to always be happy or even that happiness, in itself, is a right or something we should spend a lot of time pursuing.

Happiness is closely related to happening – what is happening now. Winning the big game or getting a job promotion might make us happy. Losing our job or having a car wreck might make us unhappy. What is happening now – or what may happen two minutes from now – can dramatically alter our happiness.

For this reason, happiness should not be confused with joy. Joy is a condition of the heart, a character trait, and part of who we are inwardly. Unlike happiness, joy is not dependent upon the current or changing circumstances. We might feel unhappy about what is going on in our lives now, and yet continue to experience joy that transcends any negative factors or influences.

We might think of happiness as being like the weather. Weather changes daily, even hourly. Joy is more like climate. The change can be long, progress slowly, and often goes unnoticed. Joy can be related to optimism. A joyful attitude will affect how we react to circumstances. For example, if we lose a baseball game, we might be unhappy, but underlining joy will allow us to enjoy playing the game anyway. If our only goal is winning or losing, we be very happy or very unhappy depending upon the outcome. A joyful spirit, however, will temper the highs and lows and allow us to find more contentment in any situation.

A sense of unhappiness whose source we cannot identify should serve as a warning light for us. Think of unhappiness as similar to the “Check Engine” light on our car dashboard. It might not indicate anything serious, or it could be a warning that we are allowing situations around us to control our thoughts.

If we are constantly unhappy at work, maybe that indicates it is time to find a new job or at least our goals or approach to how we work. Short-term unhappiness, like the weather, is expected. Things do not always go our way. But long-term unhappiness requires attention. Interestingly, the Bible says little about happiness, but has much to say about joy. In fact, it tells us joy can be found during good times and bad:

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Joy comes through adversity. No one willing seeks suffering and hardship, but it can be a very effective builder of personal character. "...we also rejoice in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope" (Romans 5:3-4).

Joy comes from strengthened faith. Challenging times, especially those clearly beyond our control, reveal where our trust and faith truly lie. "Consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance. Perseverance must finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything" (James 1:2-4).

Joy endures even when happiness flees. There are times in life when it seems that happiness has abandoned us forever, and yet through faith in God we can hold fast to joy that only He can provide. "Sing praise to the Lord, you saints of His, and give thanks at the remembrance of His holy name. For His anger is but for a moment, His favor is for life. Weeping may endure for a night, but joy comes in the morning" (Psalm 30:4-5).

© 2022. Jim Mathis is a writer, photographer and small business owner in Overland Park, Kansas. His latest book is *The Camel and the Needle, A Christian Looks at Wealth and Money*. He formerly was executive director of CBMC in Kansas City, Kansas and Kansas City, Missouri, U.S.A.

Reflection/Discussion Questions

1. How would you define "happiness"? How would you define "joy"?
2. Do you agree with the statement that happiness should not be confused with joy, and that at times they might even be mutually exclusive? Why or why not?
3. Can you think of a time when you felt great unhappiness, but despite the circumstances you still felt a sense of profound inner joy? If so, explain the situation and how it affected you.
4. The Bible tells us to rejoice, or to "consider it pure joy" when we confront severe trials in life? How do you react to this admonition? Has your perspective on this command changed in any way over the years? If so, how?

NOTE:

If you have a Bible and would like to read more, consider the following passages:
Psalm 16:11, 126:5-6; Isaiah 12:1-2; Corinthians 4:17; 1 Thessalonians 5:16-18

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