

THE SCIENCE OF HAPPINESS



Scripture:

Psalm 118:1-2, 19-29

¹O give thanks to the LORD, for he is good; his steadfast love endures forever!

²Let Israel say, "His steadfast love endures forever."

¹⁹Open to me the gates of righteousness, that I may enter through them and give thanks to the LORD.

²⁰This is the gate of the LORD; the righteous shall enter through it.

²¹I thank you that you have answered me and have become my salvation. ²²The stone that the builders rejected has become the chief cornerstone. ²³This is the LORD's doing; it is marvelous in our eyes. ²⁴This is the day that the LORD has made; let us rejoice and be glad in it. ²⁵Save us, we beseech you, O LORD! O LORD, we beseech you, give us success!

²⁶Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the LORD. We bless you from the house of the LORD. ²⁷The LORD is God, and he has given us light. Bind the festal procession with branches, up to the horns of the altar.

²⁸You are my God, and I will give thanks to you; you are my God, I will extol you.

²⁹O give thanks to the LORD, for he is good, for his steadfast love endures forever.

Luke 19:28-40

²⁸After he had said this, he went on ahead, going up to Jerusalem.

²⁹When he had come near Bethphage and Bethany, at the place called the Mount of Olives, he sent two of the disciples,

³⁰saying, "Go into the village ahead of you, and as you enter it you will find tied there a colt that has never been ridden.

Untie it and bring it here. ³¹If anyone asks you, 'Why are you untying it?' just say this, 'The Lord needs it.'" ³²So those

who were sent departed and found it as he had told them. ³³As they were untying the colt, its owners asked them, "Why

are you untying the colt?" ³⁴They said, "The Lord needs it." ³⁵Then they brought it to Jesus; and after throwing their

cloaks on the colt, they set Jesus on it. ³⁶As he rode along, people kept spreading their cloaks on the road. ³⁷As he was

now approaching the path down from the Mount of Olives, the whole multitude of the disciples began to praise God

joyfully with a loud voice for all the deeds of power that they had seen, ³⁸saying, "Blessed is the king who comes in the

name of the Lord! Peace in heaven, and glory in the highest heaven!"

³⁹Some of the Pharisees in the crowd said to him, "Teacher, order your disciples to stop." ⁴⁰He answered, "I tell you, if these were silent, the stones would shout out."

This is the Word of the Lord! Thanks be to God!



This is Palm Sunday, the launching pad for Holy Week. Fasten your seatbelts, because we are on a mission for the next seven days that culminates with Easter Joy. Are you ready? Are you happy?

If you answered yes! You are one of three Americans who say they are happy. Just thirty-three percent of Americans, when polled, said they are very happy. According to the recent Stress in America survey, young people report significantly higher stress levels and lower happiness levels than their older

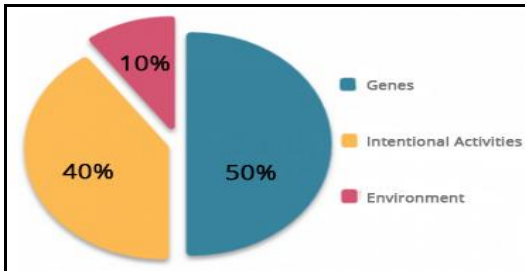
counterparts. As stress levels decrease with age, happiness levels increase with age over the long term. The poll showed that Americans over the age of fifty are more likely to be very happy.

WHAT IS HAPPINESS?

To understand this, let's define what happiness is. Happiness is a state of feeling happy, which is a feeling of pleasure, joy, bliss, contentedness, delight,

enjoyment, or satisfaction. The opposite of happiness is misery.

Although happiness is a timeless and universal human quest, scientific research has only recently turned its focus on how happiness can be sustained and increased. One research study called 'The Happiness Project' found that your state of happiness can be increased through intentional changes in your behavior and thought processes.



Only ten percent of our happiness is due to external circumstances and a full ninety percent is based on our inherited traits and behavioral practices. Fifty percent of our happiness level comes from our genes and as much as forty percent is determined by our intentional daily activities. (Lyubomirsky, Sheldon, et al., 2005)

SEVEN DAILY HABITS

The Happiness Project research confirmed that with certain practices the neural pathways in our brains that create a sense of happiness can be altered. Happiness is a set of skills we can learn through practice. Here are seven daily habits the happiness experts suggest we practice to increase our happiness.

DAILY HABIT #1: Mindfulness, the ancient practice of focusing non-judgmental awareness on the present moment, is increasingly recognized in today's scientific community as an effective way to reduce stress, increase self-awareness, enhance emotional intelligence, and effectively manage painful thoughts and feelings.

One study developed a cell phone app to track happiness to find out when are humans the most happy. Matt Killingsworth developed the app and then asked people to report their happy feelings in real time on the app and describe what they were doing at that time. He found, "We are often happiest when we're lost in the moment." (By being mindful.)

This fits with the habit of mindfulness. He suggested when we gaze at the moon and the stars, look into a loved ones eyes, eat slowly and enjoy each bite, talk and listen to friends, and pray, for example, we are happiest in those moments.

DAILY HABIT #2: Gratitude significantly increases your happiness, and protects you from

stress, negativity, anxiety, and depression. Developing a regular gratitude practice is one of the easiest ways to counter the brain's tendency to focus on negative things in our environment. By intentionally focusing on the good parts of our day, the positivity grows. In fact, it only takes twenty-one days of writing down three things you are grateful for every day to begin reaping the benefits. These scientists encourage us to "Be happy not because everything is good, but because you can see the good in everything"

DAILY HABIT #3: Happiness is good for your health. A review of hundreds of studies has found compelling evidence that happier people have better overall health and live longer than their less happy peers. Anxiety, pessimism, and a lack of enjoyment of daily activities are associated with higher rates of disease and shorter life-spans.

DAILY HABIT #4: Happiness and altruism (or helping others) are intimately linked. Doing good is an essential ingredient to being happy, and happiness helps spur kindness and generosity.

Research suggests that how we spend our time and resources is more important, than the amount of money we make. Giving to others releases endorphins, activating the parts of our brains that are associated with trust, pleasure, and social connection. The research study concluded, "Policies that promote well-being generate a virtuous circle, whereby increases in well-being promote altruism that, in turn, increases well-being. Such a cycle holds the promise of creating a 'sustainable happiness' with broad benefits for altruists, their beneficiaries, and society at large."

**Famous nineteenth century lawyer and orator, Robert Ingersoll said,
"Happiness is the only good.
The time to be happy is now.
The place to be happy is here.
The way to be happy is to make others so."**

Basically the more you give the more you live and feel happy. (Want an injection of happiness? Raise your pledge today!)

DAILY HABIT #5: Being authentic enhances happiness through social connection. When Dr. Brené Brown conducted thousands of interviews to discover what lies at the root of social connection, she found it was vulnerability, the type of vulnerability that promotes being your authentic self. When you embrace an authentic and vulnerable stance in life, people will often be open in response, allowing you to experience true connection with them.

DAILY HABIT #6: Social connectivity. Our busy lives often leave us stretched for time to connect with others, but science suggests that social connection should be at the top of our to-do lists. Dr. Emma Seppala from Stanford's Center for Compassion and Altruism Research (CCARE) says that when connection with others is present, it can boost mental and physical health, and even increase immunity and longevity.

Happiness is collective. Our happiness depends on the happiness of those to whom we are connected. Science shows that through practicing happiness, we make those we come into contact with happier. In other words, happiness is contagious! (A video about connection was shown to the congregation.)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oHv6vTKD6lg>

DAILY HABIT #7: Be happy and you will be more productive. Many people tell themselves, "If I work hard, I'll be successful. If I'm successful, I'll be happy." But recent discoveries in psychology and neuroscience show that this formula is backward; happiness fuels success, not the other way around. In fact, a Harvard study has shown that the brain, operating in a positive thinking mode is thirty-one percent more productive than in a negative thinking mode. And in addition, researchers have found that the type of work you do is key. Engaging in meaningful activity is a big indicator of happiness.

**As Harvard happiness expert
Tal Ben Shahar says,
"Happiness lies at the intersection
of pleasure and meaning."**

ARE THESE SEVEN HABITS BIBLICAL?

So I bet you are wondering if all these seven habits are encouraged in the Bible. The answer is a resounding yes!

All of the seven practices can be summed up in this, my favorite Bible passage, Philippians 4:6-8. "Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. Finally, beloved, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things."

Mindfulness happens through prayer. Being grateful and positive by thinking of all the commendable, pure, pleasing, excellent things in your

life is mentioned in this passage, too. And then in the next verse we see an encouragement to serve others to have a peaceful life. It says, "Keep on doing these things and the God of peace will be with you."

Christ's life on earth was a life of meaning and purpose through redeeming, healing and serving others. He showed us that our connection to other people is the most important key to happiness along with our connection to the love of God. God created us to be in community with one another in a loving, positive way.

WAS JESUS HAPPY ON PALM SUNDAY?

So what does this have to do with Palm Sunday? Do you think Jesus was happy on Palm Sunday? We can assume our Lord, Jesus was very happy because the people shouting, "Hosanna!" seemed to be grateful for his triumphal entry into Jerusalem.

When the people shouted, "Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord; Hosanna in the highest," Jesus probably thought, "They finally get me! They finally understand my meaning and purpose for being here on earth with them!" And even though Jesus knew he was going to the cross in less than a week's time, he was content, living a purposeful sacrificial life the way he was meant to live it. Even though he must have felt discouraged at times, he was happy knowing all things God intended were progressing as his ministry was coming to an end.

Jesus trusted in the promises found in the Psalms that highlight happiness and faith. Like Psalm 31:7 says, "I will be happy and rejoice in your faithfulness, because you notice my pain and you are aware of how distressed I am." And Jesus could have quoted Psalm 144:15, "Happy are the people whose God is the Lord"

The disciples were probably happy on Palm Sunday, too, because many of them thought Jesus was about to start a revolt against their Roman oppressors. The coming of the Kingdom of God would finally bring them freedom and justice.

FAITH AND HAPPINESS

So there was in the beginning of that Holy week, an air of happiness all around. This was the calm before the storm of Good Friday.

Faith in Christ makes us happy because it provides a sense of connection to God and a sense of purpose for our lives.

Pope Benedict once said, "Faith is a decision involving one's whole existence. It is an encounter, a dialogue, a communion of love and of life between the believer and Jesus Christ, the way, the truth and the

life. It entails an act of trusting abandonment to Christ, which enables us to live as he lived, in profound love of God and of our brothers and sisters."

Love is also a synonym for "Happiness." As Mary Baker Eddy (the founder of the Christian Science church) said, "Happiness is spiritual, born of truth and love. It is unselfish; therefore it cannot exist alone, but requires all mankind to share it."

Our own Charlie Brown connected love to happiness when he said, "Happiness is anyone and anything that's loved by you."

HAPPY

But, a sermon about happiness would not be complete without mentioning the phenomenal hit song called *Happy*. It was the most popular song in the United States in 2014.

In an article in the *New York Times* titled *Happiness Matters*, the composer, Pharrell Williams, said he was shocked by how successful his song became. He told the *New York Times* that the success of his song, *Happy*, was due to the way we all yearn for happiness. He said, "Happiness is as important as the breath of air in your lungs. If people aren't happy, the world is not right. Happiness always comes from within, and many unfortunately take it for granted, or suppress happiness instead of setting it free."

Pharrell believes that if you are grateful, you can find happiness in everything. Yet, he was truly surprised when his song became a phenomenon. Williams said, "They were moved by the spirit of *Happy*," so people young and old, from the most remote corners of the globe began recording homemade videos of themselves dancing and singing along to the song. People expressed joy to the song in the tsunami-ravaged Philippines, the Gaza Strip, Vatican City, the Ukraine and beyond."

My favorite is the kids' choir in Detroit.

With almost a billion views combined, the *Happy* song continues to inspire the pursuit of happiness.

Pharrell credited the origin of the song, *Happy*, to his grandmother. In an interview with Oprah, Pharrell gets tearful as he talks about her and how she said her happiness was a gift from God.

(The congregation was shown a video of Oprah interviewing Pharrell.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IYFKnXu623s>

So may we all be constantly happy that God sent Jesus to earth to save us and show us what happiness, and healing, and wholeness is all about.

Be happy! Jesus gave his life for you and you are so deeply loved by him! There is much to be happy about this Palm Sunday. Let us go out and spread the happiness for Christ's sake! Amen

Benediction:

Being intentionally mindful of the love of Jesus Christ will make you happier everyday. Don't be shy, do a happy dance, have fun, express your happiness for your faith in Jesus!

Let us show God how happy we are as we process out to Bowen Hall waving our palm branches as the "Happy" song" plays.

(The video was played.)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PGJX9tutZEA&list=RDPGJX9tutZEA#t=6>

And may the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you now and forever more. Amen



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