

What makes you happy?

That is a question we unconsciously answer every single day. We answer it when we schedule our day, when we budget our money, when daydream about our future, when we say our prayers. The pursuit of happiness is an integral part of our daily existence whether or not we are always aware of it.

So, what makes you happy?

There are a couple of ways we humans tend to answer that question. It doesn't matter where you live or when you lived, there are a couple of go-to pursuits that are common to all of us.

If you spend any amount time in front of screens each day you know at least one of these universal pursuits of happiness.

Buy the right body spray, and you will instantly become the coolest guy around.

Buy the right car and you will be overflowing with confidence like Matthew McConaughey.

Buy the right skin-care products and you can recapture some of that indestructible feeling of your youth.

Buy the right perfume or cologne and you will exude some fancy French joie de vivre.

Commercials - We all know commercials oversell. Some of them are just plain ridiculous. But marketers aren't dumb people. In fact, the little I've read about marketing, they happen to know an awful lot about human nature.

Whether it's that 30 second spot after a Packers touchdown on Sunday afternoon or one of those banners that fills a quarter of your screen as you scroll, just about every advertisement you see is based off a crafty, scientific attempt to plug into one of those universal human pursuits of happiness – stuff.

If you are a young single man, you know that body spray won't make you the next Ryan Gosling, but it might deliver an increased confidence, which could lead to happiness.

We all know that cars and clothes and lotions don't fix all of life's problems, but we still fill our garages, closets, and lives with them because we hope that in some small way they will make us happy.

And they often do.

God has made an amazing world filled with amazing things. We humans have taken the raw materials God has given in this world and with the intelligence he has given us we have created more amazing things. All of the stuff that surrounds us and fills our lives, as gifts from our God, do deliver a certain level of happiness.

But we all know the problem with pursuing happiness in the latest iphone. You don't have to be a Biblical scholar to know that while the stuff that God has given us in this life is capable of putting a smile on our faces, stuff doesn't deliver permanent happiness.

The human proverb "money doesn't buy happiness," is just an echo of Jesus' proverb in Luke 12, "**Life does not consist in an abundance of possessions.**" We know from experience that the happiness that stuff delivers is never as good as we want it to be, nor as permanent as we want it to be. We know that the pursuit of happiness through stuff is a never-ending pursuit. But that doesn't stop us from trying...

Just stop for a minute and think about how pervasive this human tendency to pursue happiness through the acquisition stuff is. From how we celebrate birthdays and Christmas, to our dating and courting practices, to what we teach our Kindergarteners about the importance of going to college so you can get a good paying job – our entire capitalist American society is founded on the assumption that humans will go to extreme lengths to get more stuff in the hope that it will somehow make us happy.

If you stop and examine your life and the world around you, we don't just *try* and pursue happiness through the acquisition of stuff, we've gone "all in" with the notion that stuff will make us happy.

Sometimes our this particular pursuit of happiness seems innocuous and mild – your kid's 500 toy because it's her birthday seems innocent enough. But often this particular pursuit of happiness can be cutthroat and cruel – just think of our capitalist economy functions.

It is this crazy human inconsistency: we know that stuff doesn't deliver happiness in any truly fulfilling and permanent way, but that doesn't stop us from chasing it with something akin to reckless abandon. Today Jesus would remind us that a life lived pursuing happiness is a reckless and foolish way to live.

That reading from Luke 12 began with a mob of people rushing to see Jesus. Luke tells us there were thousands of them so intent on getting close to Jesus that they were trampling each other. There was at least one man in that crowd who bought the lie that stuff can bring happiness.

One man elbowed his way through the crowd to get close enough to Jesus looking for help: "**Teacher, tell my brother to divide the inheritance with me.**"

It is a fairly nasty but still pretty common story in humanity: The parents are dead. Their stuff is up for grab. Siblings don't always agree on who gets what.

At the base of that common human disagreement is the pursuit I've been talking about: stuff will make me happy, so I want it.

First, Jesus refuses to fill the role of petty dispute solver (“Man, who appointed me a judge or an arbiter between you?”). Then Jesus uses this opportunity to tackle this human pursuit. It turns out that pursuit of happiness through stuff may not be as innocuous as we sometimes think...

“Watch out! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; life does not consist in an abundance of possessions.”

To illustrate Jesus shared another common human experience: a rich man who gets even richer and decides to rest on the laurels of his wealth – take life easy, eat, drink, and be merry. In the pursuit of happiness, this man thought he has finally reached his goal.

But it turned out the happiness that stuff brought was not permanent for this man either. What Solomon (the author of our first reading for today) realized in his life, this man would unfortunately be forced to realize in death: your pursuit of happiness through stuff was... meaningless. He got to enjoy it for less than 24 hours.

And then come the ominous point of the story: this is how it will be with whoever stores up things for themselves but is not rich toward God.

Friends the lie we tell ourselves, the lie we sometimes inadvertently teach our kids, the lie in which our entire culture is immersed is not innocuous and mild. It has real ramifications for your happiness now, and forever.

Today the Jesus who sees that this inward inconsistency is actually contributing to unhappiness wants us to step off the hamster wheel.

It is a reminder that we all need on a regular basis, at least I know I do.

This is a lie that I keep on telling myself even though I have known for a long time that it is not true. And for me, this makes my Jesus all the more beautiful.

First, because he is really good at pointing out the lie.

Sometimes he points out the lie with words – a chapter like Luke 12, a sermon like this. Sometimes all we need is a gentle reminder that all of the things God has given me, while good things, can't make me truly happy.

But Jesus knows me. Jesus knows how pervasive this lie is. He knows that I keep falling for it in my own ways as I go through life. He knows that some of the ways I've bought into this lie I'm not even aware of – that's how crazy good the devil is with this particular lie. Jesus knows that sometimes I need more than just a word of encouragement.

Sometimes, when he sees me still clinging to stuff, he lovingly says, “You fool. I'm going to take that from you.”

Jesus is not above lovingly calling me a fool and then ripping from my cold dead hands the stuff to which I cling. This parable and experience prove he loves me enough to take that step.

And in a calmer setting like this, when I'm not in the throes of having my stuff ripped away from me, it's good for me to remember what an act of love it is. He wants me to be happy in a real and lasting way. He will do whatever it takes to deliver that happiness.

So, first, how amazing it is that our Jesus is so good at lovingly, patiently, persistently identifying this lie in my life.

Second, and best of all, having shown me the lie through teaching or experience, having ripped my stuff from my hands he fills my hands with the only thing that can deliver real and lasting happiness – himself.

Jesus came, as he told his disciples, so that we could have life, and have it to the full. He doesn't want us to experience the continual frustration and disappointment that comes with a life that tries to pursue happiness in the abundance of possessions. Even more, he doesn't want me to die and lose out on happiness forever because I stored up things for myself but wasn't rich toward God.

He empties my hands of my stuff and he fills them with himself – with his love, with his forgiveness, with his promises.

Think of it this way:

It's your fifth birthday and dad is taking you out for some one-on-one time.

He takes you to McDonald's, buys you a happy meal and you walk out of that restaurant with your little Toy Story 4 action figure.

He takes you to the movies and buys you a box of Skittles.

Then he takes you to Target and you wander the toy aisles and pick out a new Lego set and a new Nerf gun.

You get home and get out of the car with your hands full of stuff – good stuff, gifts from your father.

But you get to the door, and because you have so much stuff, you can't open it.

Dad comes up behind you, “Here, give me all that, and puts out his hand.”

You look down at all that stuff in your hands and what do you do?

You give it to him. You let go of all your stuff.

First of all, because he is the kind of dad who always gives you good stuff. Even if he never gave you this stuff back, you know that he's going to keep giving you more.

But secondly, and best of all by far, because you know the simple joy of holding dad's hand and walking with him into the house he has made a home for you – a place where you are safe, provided for, and loved.

Friends, Jesus wants us to do the same.

God has given us lots of really good things in this life – thank God you have hands full of body sprays, cars, clothes, lotions, and stuff.

But never forget the simple but permanent and much more satisfying happiness that comes when after you’ve put all that stuff down, when God grabs your hand and leads you home – the home he has made for you, a place where you are safe, provided for and loved.

That is life. That is happiness. Pursue that.

Amen.