

# Finding Happiness (Ecclesiastes 5:1-6:6)

**Big Idea:** Don't try to find happiness in religion, power, and money. Find happiness in humble obedience and contentment.

I've got some good news for you today: God wants you to be happy. I really believe that. That is so different from what I used to believe: that following God meant walking away from happiness and becoming dull and serious.

I really agree with these words in a new book on happiness by Barnabas Piper:

God wants you to be happy.

This can be a difficult statement to believe. Some of us have a false conception of happiness that pits it against godliness...

But it is true. God wants me to be happy. He wants you to be happy. To believe otherwise is to turn our backs on a perfect loving Father who stands with arms open to embrace us as his children, and to usher us into the inheritance of joy that he has for us.

I want you to think about that for a minute. Take it in. This is very good news for us. Yes, life is hard, and all of us will encounter difficulties, but God's agenda for us is our happiness.

That raises a question, though. Why is it so hard to find happiness, then? The Gallup Organization tracks subjective wellbeing. It's found that, south of the border, people are feeling more anxious, depressed, and dissatisfied with their lives. What's surprising is that over half of the people with the most upward mobility reported being unhappy or very unhappy with their situation.

Something is clearly wrong. God wants us to be happy, but happiness seems harder to find than it should be.

Could it be that we are going about we're looking for happiness in all the wrong places? That's what Ecclesiastes seems to say.

## **How Not to Find Happiness**

We're looking at Ecclesiastes 5 and the first six verses of Ecclesiastes 6 today. In this section, the Preacher talks about three things that we think will make us happy but don't.

## Religion (5:1-7)

Some people look to religion to make them happy. We think that adding God to our lives will make us happy. And we're kind of right. A couple of Harvard professors found that going to church reduced mortality rates by 20-30 percent over a fifteen-year period. Research suggests that those who regularly attend services are more optimistic, have lower rates of depression, are less likely to commit suicide, have a greater purpose in life, are less likely to divorce, and are more self-controlled.

The problem is when we treat God casually. It's when we use religion as a lifestyle enhancement or supplement, thinking that adding a little bit of God will make our lives better.

In verses 1 to 7, the Preacher speaks to those who worship God and he issues a caution. "Guard your steps when you go to the house of God," he says. What's the danger? If you think that you can impress God with your vows, gifts, and promises, you're out of luck. Some people think they can throw God a bone and he will be grateful for the attention. But the Preacher shifts our approach to God:

- "God is in heaven and you are on earth. Therefore let your words be few." (5:2)
- "God is the one you must fear." (5:6)

Do not come to church and think that you add a little God to your life as a lifestyle enhancement. Be careful of treating God that casually or flippantly. God won't be

used. Humble obedience is good, but adding God as a supplement to your life will never work. Don't use religion as a tactic to improve your life.

## **Politics (5:8-9)**

A second way that we try to find happiness is through politics. What a timely passage. Is there anybody here who doesn't have an opinion about the U.S. election last week? We are shocked – shocked! – when we encounter poor people being oppressed, justice being denied, or powerful people abusing their positions.

And yet verses 8 and 9 give us a wake-up call. Just in case you thought that we could fix the problems of this world with the right political leader or party, the Preacher corrects us. "Do not be amazed at the matter" (5:8) – don't be amazed by corruption. Even the best governments are imperfect. Even the best rulers fall short. Unless there is "some Solomon to exhort and console him," said Martin Luther, "government crushes the man, extinguishes him, and utterly destroys him."

## **Money (5:10-6:6)**

So religion (adding a bit of God to our lives) and politics (trying to fix the world through the right leader) won't give us what we're looking for. The Preacher is going to get even more personal. In the biggest part of this section, the Preacher goes after perhaps the biggest trap: thinking that we will find happiness through money. We believe that if we have enough money, we will finally get the happiness we need.

The Preacher had a lot of money. He knew what researcher Jonathan Haidt observes, “Wealth itself has only a small direct effect on happiness because it so effectively speeds up the hedonic treadmill ... As the level of wealth has doubled or tripled in the last fifty years in many industrialized nations, the levels of happiness and satisfaction with life that people report have not changed, and depression has actually become more common.” Money can’t make you happy.

In fact, the Preacher gives six reasons why money won’t make you happy.

**First: no matter how much money you have, you will want more.** “He who loves money will not be satisfied with money, nor he who loves wealth with his income; this also is vanity” (5:10). A 2018 Harvard study found that if you ask someone how much money they would need to get to a 10/10 on the happiness scale, the largest group of people said they needed ten times more even if they already had a lot. No matter how much money we have, we still want more.

**Second: other people will try to take it from you.** “When goods increase, they increase who eat them” (5:11). Win the lottery, and all of your friends will show up. Buy a bigger house, and you will need to spend more to maintain it. The more money you get, the more you’ll have to maintain.

**Third: it may rob you of rest.** “Sweet is the sleep of a laborer, whether he eats little or much, but the full stomach of the rich will not let him sleep” (5:12). The Preacher is observing that affluence can actually damage your health. Did you know that there is something called [“diseases of affluence”](#)? Things like type 2 diabetes, asthma, coronary heart disease, cerebrovascular disease, peripheral vascular disease, obesity,

hypertension, cancer, alcoholism, gout, and mental health issues. Being affluent may endanger your health.

**Fourth: you have a lot more to lose.** “Riches were kept by their owner to his hurt, and those riches were lost in a bad venture” (5:13-14). And his family was depending on it! When you have money, you have to worry about how to keep it, and if you lose it, it affects those who are depending on that money.

**Fifth: at death you lose it all.** You cannot take it with you. “As he came from his mother’s womb he shall go again, naked as he came, and shall take nothing for his toil that he may carry away in his hand” (Ecclesiastes 5:15).

**Sixth: you will have a lot more stress.** “Moreover, all his days he eats in darkness in much vexation and sickness and anger” (5:17). Preoccupation with money does not lead to a happy life. “I wish all of this never would have happened. I wish I would have torn the ticket up,” said Jewel Whittaker, the wife of the lottery winner who took home the richest undivided jackpot in U.S. history.

The first few verses of chapter 6 paint a picture of a man who has everything but still isn’t happy. He has wealth, possessions, and honor (6:1), but no happiness. It’s not worth it, the Preacher says. Don’t chase this life. It won’t give you the happiness you’re looking for.

# The Surprising Path to Happiness

You may be screaming, "Hey, Preacher, do you have any good news for us?"

Well, yes, he does. When we started out today I said that God wants you to be happy. In this passage the Preacher's told us what *won't* make us happy, but he's also given us two surprising paths to joy and happiness in life. If you want to be happy, take note. This couldn't be more important.

**First: Find happiness in humble obedience.** We looked at this already. "God is in heaven and you are on earth. Therefore let your words be few" (5:2). "God is the one you must fear" (5:6). God isn't impressed at all by religiosity. Do you know what he loves? People who are humble and who love him. Don't get the Preacher wrong. You will still face all kinds of difficulties in life. But you will never experience the satisfaction, the joy, the happiness you crave until you find it in God. So love him humbly and obey him.

The happiest people are the holiest people. I see this over and over again. The happiest people are not necessarily the ones who have lots of money or a problem-free life. They're the ones who know Jesus and have found joy in him.

**Second, find happiness in contentment.**

Behold, what I have seen to be good and fitting is to eat and drink and find enjoyment in all the toil with which one toils under the sun the few days of his life that God has given him, for this is his lot. Everyone also to whom God has given wealth and possessions and power to enjoy them, and to accept his lot

and rejoice in his toil—this is the gift of God. For he will not much remember the days of his life because God keeps him occupied with joy in his heart.  
(Ecclesiastes 5:18–20)

Psychologists tell us that our brains tend to mispredict what will actually bring us happiness. We assume that if we achieve certain things in our life, we will find happiness.

- "I'll be happy if I get admitted into the right school."
- "I'll be happy if I find the right partner."
- "I'll be happy if I make vice president."
- "I'll be happy if I have my dream house."

As Harvard psychologist Shawn Achor observes, this "if-then" perspective cannot be supported by science, because each time our brain experiences a "success," it moves the goalposts of what success looks like. If you got good grades, you have to get better grades. If you have a good job, you now have to get a better job. If you hit your sales target, now you have to raise your sales target. If you buy a home, now you want to have a larger home.

The Preacher says: don't predict that you will be happy if something happens. Wake up every day and enjoy it even in the middle of its troubles. Don't sleepwalk through life. "Find enjoyment in our food, and drink, and our toil. We don't have to be rich to find something to enjoy each day." (Sidney Greidanus)

**Don't try to find happiness in religion, power, and money. Find happiness in humble obedience and contentment.**

God wants you to be happy. But we go looking for happiness in all the wrong places. Look to him in humble obedience, and then enjoy – really enjoy – all the good gifts he's given you.

May we turn to you, Father, through Jesus Christ your Son, and find in you everything that we need. And then may we enjoy all the good gifts you've given us. In the name of the One who came to give us life, Amen.