

The Secret To Happiness

A recent Calvin and Hobbes cartoon...

Calvin: *"I've found the secret to serenity and inner peace."*

Hobbes: *looking very serious and interested.*

Calvin: *"I've come to the realization that the world revolves around me. Everyone else will feel a whole lot more serene once they recognize that!"*

We may not admit it very often, but most of think a lot like Calvin. We can't help it. It's just in our nature. After all, it seems logical that there would be a lot less personal conflict and a lot more happiness in our lives if folks just realized our importance and wisdom when it comes to life!

That's just what Satan thought right before he was kicked out of heaven. The funny thing was that almost everything and everybody in the universe did revolve around him...everything except the Throne of God- and everyone except God Himself. Here's the Biblical press release on the whole affair:

You were the perfection of wisdom and beauty. You were in Eden, the garden of God. Your clothing was adorned with every precious stone--red carnelian, chrysolite, white moonstone, beryl, onyx, jasper, sapphire, turquoise, and emerald--all beautifully crafted for you and set in the finest gold. They were given to you on the day you were created. I ordained and anointed you as the mighty angelic guardian. You had access to the holy mountain of God and walked among the stones of fire. "You were blameless in all you did from the day you were created until the day evil was found in you. Your great wealth filled you with violence, and you sinned. So I banished you from the mountain of God. I expelled you, O mighty guardian, from your place among the stones of fire. Your heart was filled with pride because of all your beauty. You corrupted your wisdom for the sake of your splendor. So I threw you to the earth and exposed you to the curious gaze of kings. (Ezekiel 28:12-17 NLT)

Apparently Satan had it all: the looks, the money, the clothes, and the power of the highest position in the universe- second only to the Creator of the Universe. Yet all that he had was still not enough. Like many of us, instead of finding contentment in the abundance of his present circumstances- he deceived himself into thinking that serenity and peace would only be found in possessing something he didn't have. Only in his case it meant taking on God- and obviously that's not a very effective plan.

Wait just a minute though- before you consider the foolishness of Satan in fighting God for the Throne of the universe- look at the person in the mirror! Perhaps it's not quite as 'in Your face' as he was- but it's still the same old song and dance: I'm in control, not God.

Selfishness and pride. Where did we ever get the stupid idea that getting our way all the time would make us happy? Oh I remember now- from the same person we just talked about: Satan. He had to be pretty upset about being 'fired' by God, and now he'd like to see as many people as possible share in his misery.

The heart of Christianity is an upside philosophy of life. It is about seeing the universe revolving around Jesus, and making sure things go God's way instead of your own.

Do you really want the secret to serenity and inner peace? It's actually no secret, because Christ gave it away over 2000 years ago, and I'll gladly share it with you now:

"You're blessed when you're at the end of your rope. With less of you there is more of God and his rule. You're blessed when you feel you've lost what is most dear to you. Only then can you be embraced by the One most dear to you. You're blessed when you're content with just who you are--no more, no less. That's the moment you find yourselves proud owners of everything that can't be bought. You're blessed when you've worked up a good appetite for God. He's food and drink in the best meal you'll ever eat. You're blessed when you care. At the moment of being 'care-full' you find yourselves cared for. You're blessed when you get your inside world--your mind and heart--put right. Then you can see God in the outside world. You're blessed when you can show people how to cooperate instead of compete or fight. That's when you discover who you really are, and your place in God's family. You're blessed when your commitment to God provokes persecution. The persecution drives you even deeper into God's kingdom. Not only that--count yourselves blessed every time people put you down or throw you out or speak lies about you to discredit me. What it means is that the truth is too close for comfort and they are uncomfortable. You can be glad when that happens--give a cheer, even!--for though they don't like it, I do! And all heaven applauds. And know that you are in good company. My prophets and witnesses have always gotten into this kind of trouble." (Matthew 5:3-12, The Message)

I told you it was upside down, because Jesus' words here go against everything the world (and even your heart) tells you about being happy. Yet I think I'm going to get my instructions for life from the One who gave us life in the first place.

Bottom line- happiness in life is found in being 'others-ish' instead of selfish, and I would dare you to prove me wrong.

This week, try something completely different. Volunteer at a soup kitchen, take a homeless person out to lunch, spend some time talking to folks at a retirement home, share the message of the gospel with your friends instead of the usual laundry list of problems, read Matthew 5:3-12 so many times that you feel as though you wrote it yourself. Just do something to save yourself from yourself before it is too late!

Questions:

1. On a scale of 1-10, how selfish are you?
2. How often do you consider others more important than yourself?
3. What is one way you can apply this devotion?

A Quarter For Jesus?

I recently read about a pastor who moved to Houston, Texas. Some weeks after he arrived, he had occasion to ride the bus from his home to the downtown area. When he sat down, he discovered that the driver had accidentally given him a quarter too much change.

As he considered what to do, he thought to himself, 'you better give the quarter back. It would be wrong to keep it'. Then he thought, 'Oh, forget it, it's only a quarter. Who would worry about this little amount? Besides, the bus company already gets too much fare; they will never miss it. Accept it as a gift from God and keep quiet.'

When his stop came, he paused momentarily at the door, and then he handed the quarter to the driver and said, "Here, you gave me too much change."

The driver with a smile, replied, "Aren't you the new pastor in town? I have been thinking lately about going to worship somewhere. I just wanted to see what you would do if I gave you too much change."

As soon as he stepped off the bus, he literally grabbed the nearest light pole with a tight grip and said, "O God, I almost sold your Son for a quarter."

It's the little things, isn't it? I know we're always on the lookout to make sure that we don't commit the "big" sins- otherwise we might be a poor testimony to those outside the faith. So we go to the right social events, see R rated movies on the other side of town, and keep all of our fingers on the wheel when someone cuts us off in traffic.

So why is Christianity so quickly becoming a non-factor in its influence on culture? Because we've sold the Son for a quarter- that's why! We're so focused on the external appearance of our 'testimony' that we've forgotten the most important thing: people don't care what you know until they know that you care. In order to show people that compassion of Christ, we must first start by letting the Holy Spirit change us from the inside out.

There were people in Jesus' day who loved to show everyone what a great testimony they had. They prayed long prayers in public, never missed church, recited Scripture, wore religious symbols, and generally gave the impression that they had 'super-sized' their spirituality.

Jesus despised them.

The strongest things Jesus ever said were never directed at the "sinful" people- but He sure opened up a can on the pretentious pietistic people of the day. Here is one example of Christ's feelings towards them:

"You're hopeless, you religion scholars and Pharisees! Frauds! You burnish the surface of your cups and bowls so they sparkle in the sun, while the insides are maggoty with your greed and gluttony. Stupid Pharisee! Scour the insides, and then the gleaming surface will mean something. "You're hopeless, you religion scholars and Pharisees! Frauds! You're like manicured grave plots, grass clipped and the flowers bright, but six feet down it's all rotting bones and worm-eaten flesh. People look at you and think you're saints, but beneath the skin you're total frauds." (Matthew 23:25-28)

Don't mince words, Jesus- how do you really feel?

These folks suffered from an extreme case of what I would call "outward-itis"...only what people could see mattered to them.

God has a different plan. He wants us to start by looking at what is wrong in our hearts before we start coming off 'religious' to others. The world definitely does not need more Bible thumping bobble head figures who can simultaneously say "God Bless" to a cashier while at the same time pocketing the extra change they receive.

Unbelievers need to believe that we believe- which requires us to be real, admit mistakes, and take care of the little things.

Bottom line: before you fasten the WWJD bracelet on your wrist- make sure it is emblazoned on your heart!

It starts with the basics. Smile. Say 'please' and 'thank you'. Open doors. Let folks with fewer items ahead of you in line. Give back change- and on and on...

This week, watch and pray for opportunities. Most importantly, listen to the instruction from the One who can keep you from selling Him for a quarter:

Do you want to stand out? Then step down. Be a servant. If you puff yourself up, you'll get the wind knocked out of you. But if you're content to simply be yourself, your life will count for plenty. (Matthew 23:11-12)

Questions:

1. Does your inside reality and outside appearance match up?
2. How often do you try to appear 'righteous'?
3. What is Jesus telling you through this devotion?

Are You A BB Head?

And I tell you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it. (Matthew 16:18)

I once heard a story about a startling exhibit in Del Mar, California. A man took a glass beaker which had a small neck, but was enlarged to about seven inches in diameter below the neck. The beaker would hold about a quart.

The demonstrator used the glass beaker as a hammer to drive a spike into a wooden plank. The glass was so well tempered that the beaker did not break.

The man then took a small steel marble or bearing the size of a pea, and holding it at the neck of the beaker, dropped it inside. When it struck the bottom the glass was shattered and the beaker was broken from within.

Have you ever thought of your church/youth group as a beaker? It may have a label on it that reads Methodist, Presbyterian, Charismatic, Baptist, Lutheran, or a hundred others. Or it may have a general tag on it that says 'community church' or 'fellowship'- but can you guess what they all have in common with the beaker mentioned in the story above?

"Is it that all churches are like glass and therefore transparent to the outside world?"

That's a great guess, and in fact I agree- we shouldn't fool ourselves into thinking that the non-Christian world isn't watching us as closely as a lion waiting to pounce on his prey at the first opportunity...but that's not what I'm looking for.

"Is it that the beaker is designed to be filled in order to be useful, therefore we should pray for our church to be filled with the Spirit?"

Again, spectacular speculation, and we should definitely beg the Holy Spirit to sweep through our ministries like a level 5 tornado in Kansas...but that's still not it.

"Is it that glass needs to be cleaned, therefore we should look for some holy Windex® to clean off the fingerprints of sin?"

Oh forget it. I'll get to the point!

As you read in the verse above, Jesus promised the He would build His church, "and the gates of Hades will not overcome it." (Matthew 16:18). In other words, no outside opposition-not even hell itself- would ever be able to break down the strategy of the Savior. So just like the beaker, we may look fragile- but in the hands of the Almighty we can deliver a death blow to the 'spike' of sin on this earth.

By the same token, though, all it takes is some BB head to shatter the structure from the inside! Maybe that's why the Bible warns again and again of malcontent mischief makers that putrefy the pews. Satan doesn't have to attack from the outside to destroy a ministry; he just needs to infuse a few flibbertigibbets into God's family.

Perhaps it is time for us to encourage the marbles in our midst to move on before more damage is done.

Can you see them rolling around your building? If not, let me give you a few characteristics.

- They gossip maliciously and call it 'prayer requests' or 'sharing concerns'
- They complain more than they praise
- They go to church to 'get something out of it'

- They refuse to do 'lowly' work like fold up chairs or clean-up
- They refuse to forgive
- They can easily spot the splinter in others and miss their own personal plank (Matthew 7)
- They do not play well with others
- They go out of their way to be applauded, praised, and popularized in public places

On and on and on the list goes- but I think you should have a pretty good idea by now of the kind of folks that break the beakers. So this week, take an inventory first of yourself- then of others- and pray about how you can do your part to keep the integrity of your church as strong as God intends it to be. Walk away from gossip, confront negativity on the spot, worship in Spirit and truth, and pray for unity in your group- because God is definitely not into the game of marbles!

Questions:

1. Are you a part of the glass, or rolling with the marbles?
2. How can you help keep the 'beaker' strong?
3. What are some of the ways you are contributing to the mission of the church?

Drinking Problem

Jesus replied, "People soon become thirsty again after drinking this water. But the water I give them takes away thirst altogether. It becomes a perpetual spring within them, giving them eternal life." (John 4:13-14)

Many years ago in South America, a crew of Peruvian Sailors headed up the Amazon River came upon a strange sight. A Spanish ship was anchored off the coast, and as the Peruvians drew closer they saw that the Spaniards were in terrible physical condition. They looked the picture of death itself, their lips parched and swollen. They were dying of thirst.

"Can we help you?" shouted the Peruvians.

The Spaniards cried out, "*Water! Water! We need fresh water!*"

The Peruvian sailors, surprised at this request, told them to lower their buckets and help themselves.

The Spaniards, fearing they'd been misunderstood cried back, "*No, no we need FRESH water!*"

But they received the same reply from the Peruvians to lower their buckets and help themselves. They finally did lower their buckets into the ocean waters and when they brought the buckets on deck they discovered (to their amazement) fresh water.

There at the mouth of the Amazon river, anchored for days, too far from land to see the coast, but not too far from the mouth of the river, they had fresh water in abundance.

The sailors nearly died of thirst when the cure was easily within reach. When they placed their faith in someone who had 'been there', it saved their lives.

Sound familiar? You and I are on this incredible journey called life. Our past is forgiven and our future is secure, but sometimes we mess up the present pretty well.

Why is that? Well for one thing, just because we have trusted Christ doesn't mean that we don't have the same thirst for love, meaning, and significance. I think that some Christians are surprised when they get spiritually thirsty, so they go into denial and go through life in terrible spiritual condition.

Your salvation experience was not intended to be a fix-all happy pill that would solve all your personal issues...anybody who preaches that is probably trying to sell you something.

Believer- wake up! The Living Water is all around you, but your going to have to lower your bucket and get it yourself. Believe me, I've been on that boat- and it's not fun. But I can testify to you now that the Water is fine- don't be afraid of it: drink deeply.

Am I dampening your spirit down with too many metaphors? Let me translate some of this for you so that the message will flow better.

- Ship: your circumstances
- Journey: your life
- Saltwater: The things you used to try and make you happy, but now you know they end up making life worse
- Bucket: Your relationship with Christ
- Freshwater: The Bible, prayer, pure worship, and fellowship with other Christians.

As long as you are on this earth, you are going to have deep needs. If you want to truly satisfy your soul-oriented sigh-ings, you must develop a drinking problem. That is, it's a problem if you aren't drinking from the bucket of frequent prayer, reading the Bible (at least) daily, spending time in pure worship and hanging out with solid believers.

Cheers!

Questions:

1. Feeling 'thirsty' lately? Could it be because you have dropped the bucket?
2. How do you get your basic needs met?
3. Do you have a drinking problem? Why or why not?

You Could Learn a Lot from a Donkey

"Crucify him!" they shouted. (Mark 15:13)

O.K.- let's do an exercise in self-reflection for a moment. Think about the past few days, and how people's words have impacted you. If you are like most folks, the regular repartee of a routine day deeply encouraged and/or discouraged- and one or two words may have made the difference between brave action and boring apathy.

Or perhaps there were things that you truly wanted to do, but decided against doing because of what people might say.

A missionary named C.T. Studd had great insight into the impact of opinions. Here's a story he told:

There once was a miller, his son and their donkey went to the market. The miller rode the donkey all the way and people exclaimed, 'Cruel man, riding himself and making his son walk' So he got down and his son rode; then people slanged, 'What a lazy son for riding while poor old father walks.' Then both father and son rode, and people then said, 'Cruelty to animals, poor donkey.' So they got down and carried the donkey on a pole, but folks said, 'Here are two dumb animals carrying another dumb animal.' Then all three walked and people said, 'What fools to have a donkey and not ride it.'

Ever have a day like that? Especially when it comes to living the Christian life. As soon as you make a definite decision to serve God one way or another, I guarantee you will soon have critics of what you are doing. Let me illustrate:

"I'm not going to rated R movies anymore, Satan is using images from them to distract my mind"

"Oh c'mon, you are so legalistic- come down from your soapbox and let's go catch the latest Vin Diesel flick!"

or...

"I think it's o.k. to be friends with non-Christians as long as they aren't influencing you away from God."

"Are you serious? Christians should totally avoid unbelievers and just hang out with other believers- preferably from their own denomination. I think that's in the Bible somewhere."

See what I mean? When you start communicating your convictions, get ready to be carped and cajoled.

So when it comes down to a fight between your beliefs and your buddies, who will get the upper hand? The Apostle Paul was aware of this battle, which is why he wrote:

"I'm not trying to be a people pleaser! No, I am trying to please God. If I were still trying to please people, I would not be Christ's servant. (Galatians 1:10)

The point being that you can never make everyone happy, so why try? In fact, Paul takes it a step further to say that basing your decisions on public opinion is not only foolish, it is also a form of rebelling against Christ!

I would challenge you to fulfill God's calling on your life. Remember, the purpose of life is not to be wealthy, popular, well liked, successful, educated, good-looking, thin, buff, or even happy (though you would think so if you read some 'Christian' literature).

Jesus told us that life is about seeking first the Kingdom of God...

Perhaps it is time to start listening for the applause of heaven rather than the curtain calls from the crowd?

Questions:

1. What is God calling you to do right now?
2. In what areas are you listening to the crowd instead of Christ?
3. Is it ungodly to be popular? Why or why not?