

“Holiness Before Happiness”

By A.W. Tozer

A selfish desire for happiness is as sinful as any other selfish desire. Its root is in the flesh which can never have any standing before God. “The carnal mind is enmity against God: for it is not subject to the law of God, neither indeed can be” (Romans 8:7).

People are coming more and more to excuse every sort of wrongdoing on the grounds that they are “just trying to secure a little happiness.” Before she will give her consent to marriage the modern young lady may ask outright whether or not the man “can make me happy,” instead of wondering selflessly whether she can bring happiness to her life partner. The lovelorn columns of the newspapers are wet with the self-pitying tears of persons who write to inquire how they can “preserve their happiness.” The psychiatrists of the land are getting fat off the increasing numbers who seek professional aid in their all-absorbing search for happiness. It is not uncommon for crimes to be committed against persons who do nothing worse than “jeopardize” someone’s happiness.

That is the hedonistic philosophy of old Grecian days misunderstood, and applied to everyday living in the twentieth century it destroys all nobility of character and makes milksops of all who consciously or unconsciously adopt it; but it has become quite the popular creed of the masses. That we are born to be happy is scarcely questioned by anyone. No one bothers to prove that fallen men have any moral right to happiness, or that they are in the long run any better off happy. The only question before the house is how to get the most happiness out of life. Almost all popular books and plays assume that personal happiness is the legitimate end of the dramatic human struggle.

Now I submit that the whole hectic scramble after happiness is an evil as certainly as is the scramble after money or fame or success. It springs out of a vast misunderstanding of ourselves and of our true moral state. The man who really knows himself can never believe in his right to be happy. A little glimpse of his own heart will disillusion him instantly so that he is more likely to turn on himself and own God’s sentence against him to be just. The doctrine of man’s inalienable right to happiness is anti-God and anti-Christ, and its wide acceptance by society tell us a lot about that same society.

The effect of this modern hedonism is felt also among the people of God. The gospel is too often presented as a means toward happiness, to peace of mind or security. There are even those who use the Bible to “relax” them, as if it were a drug.

How far wrong all this is will be discovered easily by the simple act of reading the New Testament through once with meditation. There the emphasis is not upon the happiness but upon the holiness. God is more concerned with the state of people's hearts than with the state of their feelings. Undoubtedly, the will of God brings final happiness to those who obey, but the most important matter is not how happy we are but how holy. The soldier does not seek to be happy in the field; he seeks rather to get the fighting over with, to win the war and get back to his loved ones. There he may enjoy himself to the full; but while the war is on, his most pressing job is to be a good soldier, to acquit himself like a man, regardless of how he feels.

The childish clamor after happiness can become a real snare. One may easily deceive himself by cultivating a religious joy without a corresponding righteous life. No man should desire to be happy who is not at the same time holy. He should spend his efforts in seeking to know and do the will of God, leaving to Christ the matter of how happy he shall be.

For those who take this whole thing seriously, I have one suggestion: Go to God and have an understanding. Tell Him that it is your desire to be holy at any cost, and then ask Him never to give you more happiness than holiness. When your holiness becomes tarnished, let your joy become dim. And ask Him to make you holy whether you are happy or not. Be assured that in the end you will be as happy as you are holy; but for the timing being let your whole ambition be to serve God and be Christlike.

If we dare to take a stand like that we may expect to know a new degree of inward purification. And, God being who He is, we are more than likely to know a new degree of happiness as well, but a happiness that springs out of a more intimate fellowship with God, a happiness that is elevated and unselfish and free from the pollutions of the flesh.