

Pursuit of happiness: are we serving our idols or are we following God? How do we live a happy life in an unhappy world?

Put up your hand if winning the Lotto would make you a happy person? It would definitely make me a happy person. (Point to a person/call out a person's name) What would you do if you won the lotto? How about you? As you guys have pointed out, winning the lotto is often seen as the gateway of living the idealised life.

However, personal stories tell us that winning the lotto often leads to more problems. Lotto winners have lost money from bad investments, out of control spending, gambling, being harassed for money by "friends". As a result, the lotto winners are ironically left without a penny to their name.

This is an example of how society influences us to rely on external circumstances so that we can experience happiness. Of course, God wants to bless us with His creation so that we can appreciate and enjoy creation for what it is. However, our attachment to creation can become an obstacle to being happy when earthly things replace God and become our top priority in life.

Can anyone tell me what "idolatry" is? Not "adultery", but "idolatry".

An author named Tim Keller defines idolatry in his book, "Counterfeit Gods" as "not just a failure of not obeying God, but placing your heart on something else other than God". "It is something you feel you must have to be happy, something that is of more importance and value in your heart than God". It could be human approval, reputation, power, financial advantage, work or relationships.

This definition is based on Colossians 3:1-5.

3 Since, then, you have been raised with Christ, set your hearts on things above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. ²Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things. ³For you died, and your life is now hidden with

Christ in God. ⁴When Christ, who is your life, appears, then you also will appear with him in glory. ⁵Put to death, therefore, whatever belongs to your earthly nature: sexual immorality, impurity, lust, evil desires and greed, which is idolatry.

The problems with having idols include:

- a) Nothing that we idolised every satisfy us and give us complete meaning and purpose. We often start feeling disappointed or let down when we rely on our idols for happiness. Ecclesiastes 5:10: “Whoever loves money never has enough; whoever loves wealth is never satisfied with their income. This too is meaningless”. For example, often we feel like we are bursting with are when being in a new relationship. However, we start to realise that our partners aren’t perfect. For example, the female would start to realise that her boyfriend has selective hearing, and the male would soon realise that his girl’s favourite type of date is to sit down and talk over a cup of tea.
- b) It negatively affects our relationship with God, and thus our lives. Idols prevents us from fully participating in the purposeful life God created for us. If we resist God’s plans for us, then He will allow us to be independent and take responsibility for the outcome of our journey.

So then what or who can we rely on for happiness while living in a world full of cruelty and suffering?

Jesus talked about happiness in the Sermon on the Mount, also known as the Beatitudes. This sermon is well known, and even Mahatma Ghandi read this piece of scripture on a daily basis. This is about how to find happiness and fulfilment in an unhappy world.

To put the Beatitudes into context, Jesus did this sermon to a crowd who experienced oppression from the Romans and saw Jesus as their saviour. They

had this expectation that an external change would occur for them to be happy (i.e. being freed from the Roman's oppression). Here they were listening to who they believed would be their King on Earth...and Jesus told them this:

“Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven”.

He wasn't saying, “If we change our external circumstances, we will be happy”. Instead, Jesus was saying that, “happiness will be obtained if an internal change takes place within us”. “Being poor in spirit” doesn't refer to having a small faith in God. Instead, Jesus was implying that to be happy we need to humbly acknowledge that we need God to satisfy our needs. Entrance into heaven only occurs through surrendering ourselves to God.

The phrase “surrender” very much goes against our grain because society tells us to be independent and in control of our own situation. I don't know about you all, but I often feel quite torn and fearful when faced with the decision of choosing God's way or my way. Jesus was aware of this, and this is written in the book of Mark.

Jesus said “...Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. ³⁵ For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me and for the gospel will save it. ³⁶ What good is it for someone to gain the whole world, yet forfeit their soul? ³⁷ Or what can anyone give in exchange for their soul?” Mark 8:34-37.

In this passage, Jesus gives us the option of choosing between satisfying our soul or fulfilling our earthly desires and living the desired life. Jesus is saying, “Why go to so much effort to save and prolong your life when you are going to die? Why indulge in the materialistic happy lifestyle when it is going to leave you feeling unsatisfied? Why don't you deny and surrender yourself to me so that I can fulfil the quench in your soul? I will give your life meaning and purpose. Even better, I will give you eternal life.”

People might be thinking, “that’s all very nice to hear, but I do have ambitions and desires...I want to do well at work and I don’t want to experience financial hardships. God loves us, and like a parent, He knows and cares about our ambitions and desires. Psalms 37:4 says, “Take delight in the Lord, and He will give you the desires of your heart”. Give your ambitions and desires to God, and He will take care of you.

I can’t speak on your behalf, but I don’t always succeed in denying my desires and following God. And that is okay. Being a Christian doesn’t mean we have no idols. Instead, being a Christian means that with God’s help, we keep drilling through our bedrock of idols so that we can get closer to God.

So the question I pose for you all now is what will you choose? Will you surrender yourselves to God or will you commit yourself to your desires? If you are currently thinking that you will surrender yourselves to God, then I want to further challenge you. I encourage you to reflect on times when you did and didn’t prioritise God so that you gain insight into your idols, the strategies which are most effective for you in making God a priority, and situations which might personally tempt you in not making God a priority (e.g. stress associated with work or family). The purpose of having this insight is so that you are more equipped in surrendering yourselves to God when you have competing demands for your attention.

If we want to rely on God for happiness, then we need to:

1. Acknowledge our need for God.
2. Repent over our sins and rejoice over what Jesus has done in our lives. Repenting and rejoicing come hand in hand; it is not healthy to be in a relationship where you are only repenting and feeling guilty about your sins. An example of rejoicing is Christian mindfulness. This refers to being mindful of God’s presence in our lives.

3. Pray to God that he will continue to transform us and help us to love Him more than our idols. Because He doesn't want us to love our partner, or children, or family or work less, but to love God more.