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Leadership

The Gospel and the Happiness Paradox

Can eternal happiness be achieved by selfish pursuit?

by John Ortberg

What is the gospel? Folks in the most interesting places are asking that question these days. When I was growing up, in the 1890s, no one had to ask what the gospel was. We knew. It was the answer to the question: "If you were to die tonight, how do you know for sure you'd go to heaven?" The gospel was what got you saved. We knew what getting saved was, too. Getting saved was being placed in the heaven-bound category. And we knew what heaven was. Heaven was the pleasure factory where everybody wanted to go after death.



But now folks like N.T. Wright (from a New Testament historical perspective), and Dallas Willard (from a spiritual formation and discipleship perspective), and Shane Claiborne (from a community perspective), and Brian McLaren (from a general gadfly perspective), are calling us to rethink what the gospel really means. Recently someone asked me to comment on it. (Actually it was my wife. And she did so only because I asked her to ask me to comment on it so I'd have an excuse to write about it.) So here are a few thoughts.

I recently subscribed to an actual, academic, peer-review journal called *Journal of Happiness Studies*. "Positive psychology" is the big new trend in social science over the last decade, so all kinds of researchers have decided to explore the northern rather than southern hemisphere of human emotions.

One theme that keeps cropping up is the happiness paradox: "the more directly one aims to maximize pleasure and avoid pain, the more likely one is to produce a life bereft of depth, meaning, and community." One article listed eleven separate facets of the happiness paradox. Another explained the principle of indirection: happiness, *by its nature*, cannot be obtained by direct pursuit. You have to sneak up on it. Or rather, you have to let it sneak up on you while you're pursuing something more important.

It struck me that the traditional expression of the gospel I heard growing up fell into a similar trap. There was not much serious thought about the true nature of heaven. (If you've been avoiding God all your life, would you want to be in heaven? It appears that God will be very hard to avoid there.)

Maybe the "if you were to die tonight" version of the gospel falls victim to the happiness paradox. If "heaven" is understood as "ultimate happiness," then I can seek to obtain it while remaining trapped in my self-centeredness. If "heaven" is understood as the eternal pleasure factory, then obtaining it has no intrinsic relationship to transformation, therefore no intrinsic relationship to discipleship.

But if the gospel really is the announcement of the availability, through Jesus, of the

"with-God life," then things begin to fall into place. Grace is not just the forgiveness of sin, it is the power to live the with-God life from one moment to the next. Heaven is not a pleasure factory that an angry God chooses to shut some people out of because they don't pass a theology test; it is a community of servanthood that can only be enjoyed by a certain kind of character.

Discipleship or obedience is not something we have to cajole people into by obligation or gratitude ("after all, Jesus died for you; the least you can do is deny yourself happiness for a while on earth"), it is simply the process of learning to enter into the good, with-God life. The gospel becomes social as well as personal—not because individuals don't matter, but because to be "saved" means (among other things) to be delivered from the chronic selfishness that contributes to the world's hurt and to my misery.

We do have a ways to go on one great task regarding the gospel. And that is how to articulate a biblically sound, spiritually powerful gospel in a way that calls for great clarity of decision.

One reason the old "if you were to die tonight" gospel was so popular (and, I think, has been used by God to a large degree), is that at least it helps people be very clear that they've made a decision about something. ("I'm not going to earn my way anymore; I'm on the grace plan.") And that decision itself is often enough to start people on the road toward God.

In our day, I think, we are seeing more accurate ways of understanding the gospel. But we need clarion calls of directness to help people respond today.

When Jesus walked the earth, the call "Follow me" was easily understood. People would actually, physically, bodily, walk with Jesus. People *knew* if they were following.

When the church formed, the call to follow Jesus was easily understood. There was an alternative community that met daily, that radically transformed people's financial lives, social lives, time, learning, allegiances, and hope. People *knew* if they were following.

In our day, that experience has become so diluted and enculturated that people have a hard time *knowing*.

The availability of life, with God, in his favor and power, as a gift of grace we receive by repentance and trust, through the death and resurrection of Jesus—that's the gospel with power. What needs still to be done is to find ways to express this with great clarity and simplicity, ways to help ordinary people know for sure they have made the great decision, the great commitment of their lives.

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