

Happiness is Having God on Your Side

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[0 : 00] This is the morning service at Holy Trinity on the 1st of December 2002. The preacher is Steve Abbott.

His sermon is entitled, Happiness is Having God on Your Side. It is based on Mark chapter 10, verses 13 to 16.

Amen. Thank Paul for what I think is an incredible privilege to be able to preach on the first two Sundays of the opening of the building.

So I classify it as a very great privilege indeed. Can I urge you to take the lime green, I think, whatever colour you want to call it, the bright green sheet.

It has the text from Matthew 10 that I'm speaking on that was read a little while to us. And it'll be good for you to have it because I will be referring to it from time to time as I'm speaking. So I urge you to have that at hand.

[1 : 29] If I was to ask the question, who am I? For most of you, that would be a pretty difficult question to answer. Well, at least at a deep level it would be. At a superficial level you could decide, well, I'm male.

You could decide I'm about 5 foot 10 and a half inches tall. And the fact that I use those particular criteria indicates something probably about my age that I still think in feet and inches.

And you could decide about my colouring and the fact that I have short hair, at least at the moment, because my wife just recently did it again. There are all sorts of things you could tell from looking at me.

If you look closely you'd notice I've got a wedding ring, it probably means I'm married and possibly I'd have kids because I'm the age I am. And so on and on it goes, but only at a superficial level. You can't really say whether I'm happy or not.

You can't really know whether I'm a contented person or not. You can't really tell from looking at me whether I'm a Christian or not, although you suspect that if Paul's invited me to preach that I might be, at least that.

[2 : 31] You can't work out whether I'm rich, whether I'm content. You can't tell whether the political party I voted for won yesterday or not from looking at me.

It's because people haven't found satisfying answers to those deeper questions of who we are as people in terms of contentment and happiness and joy and feeling satisfied with life.

But people actually go reading self-help books and they must be pretty popular. I encourage you sometime to go into a Collins bookshop or a Dimmicks or something and look at the self-help section.

It's vast. There are all sorts of books available. So I brought a couple of titles along I thought you might be interested in. Here is one. How to be an Almost Perfect Husband written by Wives Who Know.

Or How to be an Almost Perfect Wife by Husbands Who Listen to Their Wives. Interestingly though, if you look at the self-help section, the section that is the largest is the one on finding happiness.

[3 : 34] It seems that happiness is a great pursuit of people today. So here's a couple of titles. Twelve Simple Secrets of Happiness for Only \$15.95, which if you buy it makes the author happy.

For those who are more mathematically challenged, there are nine steps to lifelong happiness. And for those that are time challenged in our busy world, there's one that says, How to Become Happy in Eight Minutes.

But I'd be cautious. It took longer than that to read the introduction. But even if you read the books and applied the principles, I wouldn't count on being happy.

You see, even the rich and famous, the people that often we look at and think, if only I was like them, I'd be happy. And we know that Australians are like that because we were the biggest gamblers in the world per capita.

I mean, it's amazing. Each night, the keynote tie totalers, some a million bucks or something, there's a lot of people buying tickets and putting their money in the hope that wealth will bring happiness, or at least enable you to buy the things that will bring happiness.

[4 : 37] But it's a false path. Well, at least it is, if you listen to any of the rich and famous. For example, Raquel Welch, who would be seen as being a fairly, I guess, wealthy and content person, listen to what she has to say.

I had acquired everything I wanted, yet I was totally miserable. I thought it was very peculiar that I had acquired everything I'd ever wanted as a child. Wealth, fame, accomplished in my career, I had beautiful children and a lifestyle that seemed terrific, yet I was totally and miserably unhappy.

I found it very frightening that one could acquire all these things and still be so miserable. And looking at a more younger actor, Leonardo DiCaprio, a couple of years ago, made this comment.

Paradise to me is a false concept. You learn that happiness is something that comes in fleeting moments, in little moments when you least expect it.

For him, of course, happiness isn't there all the time. That's what he's saying. He isn't content all the time and satisfied with life. But if you and I were to think about our happy moments, I think most often they're associated with human relationships.

[5 : 53] This morning we're going to have a happy occasion, I trust. The baptism of Alexander will be a happy occasion and the party afterwards, I guess, the celebration afterwards, will be a great time of family gatherings.

You think about it. How many of you have been to an unhappy marriage? The only people who are unhappy at a wedding, I mean, an unhappy wedding, are those who maybe if they're, the person they love is getting married to somebody else.

But other than that, normally weddings are really happy occasions. We've been to unhappy marriages, I know, but happy weddings are nearly always the case.

Just like anniversaries and birthdays. They're great happy occasions. Children cannot hide their happiness and delight when their parents cheer them on and demonstrate love and acceptance of them.

It's just what kids are like. I used to go swimming in the same swimming pool as Ian Thorpe when I lived in Sydney. Now, if Ian Thorpe had ever taken the time to get out of the swimming pool and come over as I was doing my laps and say, listen, you swim really well for a guy your age, I'd be pretty chuffed.

[6 : 57] Not sure about the age bit, but I'd like the other bit. Because, see, I hold him in high regard and he's accepting me. He's saying, you know, you're okay at what you're doing. And if you're into fashion and Nicole Kidman came over to you in a shop and said, you know, you've got style and great dress sense, you'd probably feel pretty good.

See, happiness often flows from when we're affirmed, when we're accepted, and when we have a real sense of belonging. Now, I actually think that despite the fact that most Australians don't go to church, that deep down they really want to know that God accepts them.

I suspect that because people still bring their children for baptism. Most parents don't withdraw their children from RE classes. And at Christmas time, they often take them to carol services.

And they even bring them along at Easter. And they try to send them to Sunday school. A vast number of Australians still do that, even though they themselves have very little contact with the church.

I think deep down we want our kids and even our family to have a connection with God, our Creator. We'd like to know that, as Crocodile Dundee put it, that me and God, we'd be mates.

[8 : 13] Even though we don't have a lot of connection all the time, deep down, scratch below the surface, and people want some connection with God. We saw that recently during the Bali bombings, when churches were filled with people for a short period of time.

And some even paid hundreds of dollars to fly back to Bali for the Hindu cleansing ceremony. People want a connection with God of some sort, even though it may not necessarily be the Christian view of God.

People want a connection. Put this another way, we'd like to think we had a place in God's family to be citizens in His kingdom.

We'd like to be sure that all our family had God's pleasure, pardon, and paradise all sewn up. That they had the blessing of God upon them.

And I want to say from personal experience that having that relationship is wonderful. It is great to know that I belong to God. And it brings me much greater happiness and Sue, my wife's not here, she was here at the earlier service, and so I'll say it here, because she's not here, no, not because she's not here, that in fact my relationship with God brings me greater happiness than even my marriage does, even though I'm happily married.

[9 : 34] Because see, unlike me and my wife, we're sometimes fickle. And you know, you don't get enough sleep or things go a little bit awry and there can be tension at times.

But with God, I know I'm accepted and I'm loved unconditionally all the time. To belong to God brings a great sense of happiness and deep-seated joy and contentment.

So I want to recommend another how-to book this morning. And this small portion of it from the Bible. God's how-to book. And it teaches us how to belong to God's kingdom family.

It teaches us how we can find lasting, deep happiness. And if you pay attention, you'll know the answer to that question. And the first thing you'll notice if you look at this text is that you can't be happy with God on the basis of human thinking.

Notice the first couple of paragraphs. People were bringing little children to Jesus to have him touch them. But the disciples rebuked them. When Jesus saw this, he was indignant.

[10 : 39] He said to them, but that, he said to them, let the little children come to me. Do not hinder them for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these. Now, prior to the Olympics, many parents took their children along to see the Olympic flame.

I was living in Sutherland Shire in those days, in Sydney. And we went along and there were literally thousands upon thousands of people lining the streets. We could barely get a look in. And all these parents had their little kids who probably didn't know what a flame was about sitting on their shoulders so they could see this flame go past.

It took about 30 seconds. But they were there. Went to all this trouble. Because you see, I guess the parents wanted their children to see it because this was a unique event.

This was something they might never see again in their lifetimes. They wanted to see the flame. And I guess the same reason that parents spent a fortune taking their children along to the Olympic Games itself to see things.

Some of you may have gone all the way up to Sydney and paid a lot of money for accommodation so you could go to an Olympics that you might never ever see again and experience. Well in the first century it was like that with Jesus.

[11 : 47] He was special. He was unique. He was doing incredible things. Great miracles. People were being healed. He showed power over demonic influences. And so people brought their children to him.

And they actually wanted more than just a vision. They didn't want to just see him. They wanted their children to receive blessing. a prayer of God's blessing. And they know that God was on him by the things he was doing.

And they wanted their children to be touched and held by him. And so they brought their children to see this person. But there was a hiccup.

Notice. Jesus' disciples figured that he was too busy to bother with the little children. It was drawn to our attention earlier in the children's talk. He was a man of influence. And he was always being distracted.

And they felt that Jesus didn't have time for little kids. And these were little ones, especially little ones. Jesus could hold them in his arms. And so his mind had sought to turn the children back.

[12 : 52] And Jesus' response teaches us something very profound. That our human ideas about how you can be acceptable to God are not accurate. They are inaccurate.

These disciples, like us, were not on the Lord Jesus' wavelength. He was transmitting an AM signal and they were in the Burnley Tunnel. And they couldn't hear a thing.

They were missing the point. They had their own ideas about what was important to God and who was important to God and who should have an audience with Jesus and who shouldn't.

And this type of thinking is alive and well in many Aussie hearts and minds. The kingdom of God, you see, belongs to the worthy. God's interested in those who have earned the right to be with him by living decent lives, by doing sort of appropriate things that God would like.

And I know it's alive and well in people's lives and not just those who even come to church but those outside. Let me share an example. I know a man who at the age of 78 was told by a doctor that he had a terminal illness for which there was no cure and no treatment.

[14 : 00] And over the nine months of the rest of, for the next nine months after he was diagnosed and given this information, he struggled about how to be sure he was on God's side and that he could belong to God.

And we spent many hours and many occasions discussing and talking about what it was or how it was he could have a relationship with God. And this 78-year-old man kept saying things like this to me.

He said, I must have to do something. You know, it'd be good if I went to church, wouldn't it? I said, yeah, that'd be a good thing to do but it's not going to make you right with God. He said, it'd be good if I read the Bible and it'd be a great thing to do to find out how to relate to God not how to have a relationship with God.

it'd be good if I did it'd be good if I, it kept going on about, wouldn't it be good if I did things because my father had lived his whole life figuring that you did things in order to earn the favour of others and that's what it must be like with God as well.

He had to please God somehow in order to merit acceptance. How could it be possible that he lived 78 years of his life without God as number one and then he could somehow or other die and still belong to God's family?

[15 : 21] Sound familiar? Well listen up and see what Jesus has to say about such desperate human foolishness. If we can't belong by human thinking how can we belong?

Well only by God's free, generous and abundant grace and kindness. Look again at sentence 14. When Jesus saw the disciples stopping the kids from coming he was angry, he was ticked off, he was indignant.

He said to them let the little children come to me and don't hinder them for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these. He is very unhappy and angry with their disciples' response.

Have they not understood his reason for coming? Have they failed to grasp the true nature of membership in God's kingdom? Indeed, let them learn right now that it is he who has come and it is those who come to him like these little children who are welcomed with him, to him and welcomed with open arms.

Notice what he says, the kingdom of God belongs to such as these. So if the kingdom belongs to these children or people who are like these children, what is it about the children that makes them acceptable?

[16 : 43] What is it that they have done? How have they come to be in this happy place that God would open his arms to them? Well let's look again at the verses. In the first opening paragraph we're told people were bringing little children so they hadn't done much there.

they were being brought. In sentence 14 some people try to stop them from coming and Jesus says let the children come and then in sentence 16 we're told that Jesus took the children in his arms, put his hands on them and he blessed them, he prayed for them, he asked God's blessings upon them.

Do you notice all the things these children did to receive God's favour? Did you notice how they became recipients of God's kingdom and members of it? by doing zilch, zippo, not a single thing did they do.

It was all done for them. Everything was done for them. They are absolutely dependent upon the actions of others and in particular they are dependent upon Jesus in order to receive God's favour.

They brought nothing to the relationship except the fact that they were there. it was a free gift from beginning to end. You see acceptance with God is based on what Jesus Christ does for you not your performance for him.

[18 : 08] Returning to my father, I had to explain to my dad over and over again that it was only on the basis of what Jesus Christ did at the cross and at the empty tomb where he broke the powers of death that my father could have any hope of belonging to God's kingdom and indeed that was my same position.

It wasn't by being a minister. It wasn't by sort of doing good things that I was acceptable but on the same basis. Let me ask a question here.

Who of you has a happy family? Who has a happy marriage? Now I realise you might need to confer for a moment to make sure you both put your hand up at the same time but are there any here?

Come on, is there anyone here who could say we've got a reasonably happy marriage? I've said reasonably, I'm not trying to push it too hard, okay? There's a few hands, someone's forcing a hand up over here. Okay, well I'm going to pick the Jacob's many coloured jumper because she had to have a hand forced up but I want to say I want to belong to this family.

Now I want to say how can I belong to this family? Well I'll tell you what I'm going to do for you so I can become a member of your family. I'm going to come around and I'm going to mow your lawns on weekends. I'm going to do all the ironing for you.

[19 : 26] I'll wash the windows and if necessary even paint the house. I'm not good on eaves but I'm okay on everything else. Okay, I'll come and do that. Now I want to know whether you'll give me a key to the front door. I want to know whether you'll let me come in any time I like into your home as a member of the family would be able to and you know raid the fridge, have a beer, have a glass of red wine if that was all white wine, whatever's available and would you also please write me into your will because I'm now a member of your family.

Now their faces are changing colour. You see how can I be a member of this family? How can I belong to this happy family I want to belong to? By doing all those good things that suddenly allow me to be a member of their family?

Absolutely not. The only way I can be a member of this family is if they take the initiative. If they bring me up and say we want to adopt you into our family, we want to legally make you one of ours and then I can be embraced.

But it's all dependent upon that family accepting and welcoming me. My friends that is exactly what it's like with God. You can't tell God how you're going to be acceptable to him.

You can't tell him how you're going to become a member of his family. He tells you. That is why you've got to be like a little child. When did a little child turn up and say I want to be part of your family?

[20 : 47] They're lumbered with the ones they're born into usually. you have to become like a little child with God.

Humble, hands open, accepted and loved unconditionally and that is he who must come before God with no baggage, with no claims.

You have to be childlike to belong to God's kingdom. Look again at sentence 15. I tell you the truth. That's Jesus' way of saying listen up, this is important.

I tell you the truth. Anyone who will not receive the kingdom of God like a little child will, listen to the next word, never enter it.

See, there isn't any other way. You want to belong, you've got to do it God's way. You will never enter it unless you're willing to come as a little child to God.

[21 : 53] He took the children in his arms, put his hands on them and blessed them. I brought a little child along with me. It's headless but it's a little child. Little children have yet to be excited by selfish ambitions, distorted by a desire for honour.

Talking about little children here, the ones that we carry it in our arms. Or distracted by a lust for greatness. They are defenceless, they are weak and they are totally dependent.

This is not something we adults like, is it? It's what my father struggled with. To come to a place in his life at 78 years of age and be able to say I am totally dependent upon God.

When the whole of his life had been lived in achieving things and making a name for himself within his own context, not trying to be proud and famous worldwide but just be known as someone who worked hard and achieved things.

I am so grateful to God that six weeks prior to his death he finally gave up trying to please God and let go and surrendered to Christ.

[23 : 01] He became like a little child and consequently he is a child of heaven now. This is the childlike attitude we must embrace if we are to be welcomed in the kingdom of God and receive the embrace of Christ Jesus.

To be able to be taken in his arms, to be held and to receive the forgiveness of God. Jesus here in this passage is opening his arms to embrace little children and to pass on God's favour.

At the cross he would again open his arms in order to embrace sin for us. He would do this to bless us, granting us the pardoning favour of God on humanity as a whole so that every human being could be forgiven and pardoned.

This scene before us as Jesus visually takes these children into his arms is a visual aid teaching us about how to belong to God's kingdom, to discover that happiness is belonging to God's family.

In the late 1990s there was a terrible, awful car crash in a northern New South Wales town.

[24 : 17] I have the article here. It's entitled Hero Died So His Son Might Live. Truckie David Wallace, 36, sacrificed his life to save his 11-year-old son from almost certain death 10 days ago when his timber truck crashed and burst into flames.

Mr. Wallace threw himself on top of his son Todd, using his body to shield the boy from the intense heat. Rescuers battled for three hours to free the boy from beneath his father's body after they heard his muffled cries for help.

There's a dad putting his life on the line so his son might survive. Dad was burnt to death. the son was burnt but he lives this day because his dad was willing to sacrifice his life for his son.

And what Jesus does at the cross is open his arms for us and he bears the punishment and the guilt that we deserve for telling God how we'll relate to him. And we can only find forgiveness and pardon if we will come with nothing in our hands and surrender to him and admit that we've been doing it the wrong way and we've been arrogant to do it that way.

We've looked at one brief scene from God's great how-to book the Bible, the Word of God. It has clearly shown us that God's blessing of forgiveness and membership in his kingdom is a free gift. It cannot be merited or earned.

[25 : 47] These little children we need to rely like these little children we need to rely absolutely on the death of Jesus for forgiveness to admit we have ignored God's path for life and assumed we knew it better.

Do you want about to answer the question who am I which I asked at the beginning of this sermon for yourself and be able to say what the words on this t-shirt say and they're a little bigger on the back.

I have great worth because Christ gave his life for me. I am deeply loved, fully pleasing, totally forgiven, accepted and complete in Christ.

That is the testimony of those who have given their lives to Christ and it can be your testimony. Craig David in a song called Walking Away has these words.

He says I'm walking away from the troubles in my life. I'm walking away, oh to find a better day. I'm going, I'm going to find a better day. Our pursuits for happiness will disappoint and weary us but we can find a better day if we will walk away from our self focus and how we'll relate to God and put our focus on how God tells us to relate to him by simply accepting his kindness and his free offer.

[27 : 05] That is why on the other side of the green sheet you'll find a prayer. Prayer is how we talk to God. It's a prayer of surrender. It's a prayer as the hands underneath the little box with the prayer in it suggest that we come open handed.

And I want to invite you all to take that sheet if you haven't already gotten your hand and to look at that prayer as I quickly read through it and explain it. There are three paragraphs to it. The first part is the sorry bit. It says, Dear Father God, I admit that I've run life my way and not relied upon you.

Please forgive me for this sin. The second part is the thank you part of the prayer. I'm so thankful that your son Jesus died on the cross and rose to life. Making it possible for me to be a forgiven member of your great kingdom.

And the third part is the help me bit. Please help me from today to follow Jesus as my loving leader and guide. There's nothing in the prayer about what you and I will do. It's all about God, we need you.

We're lost without you and we're thankful you've done everything for us. I'm going to pray that prayer aloud and for those for whom it's appropriate, I want to invite you to say it as a way of yielding your life to God and beginning afresh in a new relationship with God on his terms instead of your own.

[28 : 18] This prayer is not appropriate for those of you who are already Christian. You already belong. You don't need to do it again. Once it's done, it's done. It's not appropriate for those of you who are not yet convinced the Christian faith is true.

You don't make a decision of this ilk, of this complete reorientation of life without being convinced that this is actually the truth. And so it's not a prayer for you either. It is a prayer for those of you who have never ever done it and who have been convinced that Jesus is the truth and you ought to relate to him as he says and not as you think you ought.

And if you've been convinced this morning, then it's a prayer for you. So as I pray it, I invite you to say it in your own mind. It's not magical. You need to mean it as a way of saying from now on, God, I want you to be number one.

So I'll pray it aloud and I invite you to say it along with me quietly in your own mind if it's appropriate for you. So let's pray. Dear Father God, I admit that I've run life my way and not relied upon you.

Please forgive me for this sin. I am so thankful that your son Jesus died on the cross and rose to life, making it possible for me to be forgiven, a forgiven member of your great kingdom.

[29 : 34] Please help me from today to follow Jesus as my loving leader and guide. Amen. Amen.