New Inventions: Because I’m Happy! Memory Verse: Jeremiah 17:7

May 28th 2023 Scripture Reading: Matthew 6:25-34

**SLIDE 1 – Title**

Well last week we made a slight pivot. We are still taking a look at worldviews but we are specifically trying to tackle the doctrines of our culture. We are trying to get at what it is that secularism teaches. And we need to be aware of the ideas going around out there because we are called to engage with them and the people who uphold them. C.S. Lewis refers to Christianity as a fighting religion. Now that could be easily misunderstood, but what he meant was Christians can and should remain in the debate. We have good reasons to believe what we believe and we ought to be able to argue some of those points. And overall, it seems that many Christians have lost that fighting spirit. It seems like we are not allowed to have it. It’s better and certainly easier to just keep quiet.

But, knowing and recognizing the doctrines of the culture is not always easy, so that is why we are going to discuss them now. The first bad idea we tackled last week…does anyone remember? Feelings are the ultimate guide. We said this teaching shows up in phrases like, “Follow your heart.” Following Jesus then becomes acceptable if you happen to feel like it at any given point.

This next bad idea is related: Happiness is the Ultimate Goal.

**SLIDE 2 - Happiness is the Ultimate Goal**

A few years back pop superstar Pharrell released the seemingly innocuous song “Happy”. If you don’t know it, I am sure you have at least heard it. It was played everywhere, and though it was innocent enough on it’s face, it did in fact portray this particular doctrine of secularism. Here is the chorus: PLAY VIDEO

**SLIDE – VIDEO**

**SLIDE - Clap along if you feel like happiness is the truth**

“Clap along if you feel like a room without a roof. Clap along if you feel like happiness is the truth. Clap along if you know what happiness is to you. Clap along if you feel like that’s what you want to do.” Happiness is the truth, happiness is specific to each of us and if that’s what you want to do…then the implication is, do it! Do what makes you happy.

As a father of a student on the cusp of graduating, I have heard this doctrine so many times. As students are looking to their future, they are in the process of making goals. What do you want to do with your life? And parent’s have an answer, “We just want him to do what makes him happy. We just want him to be happy.” As a parent, I might say that, but I don’t really mean that. What I really mean is we want our son to work hard in school, achieve a good job and work hard there, get married and work hard at raising a family. Now, to be sure, happiness can be found in that process, but it you’ll notice, the starting point was hard work, not happiness.

Happiness may be the result of some sort of investment of hard work, it may be the result of blood, sweat and tears, so in that sense happiness is more or less earned. It comes as a reward. That seems to describe what we know as the American Dream. Work hard, reap the benefits.

**SLIDE 5: American Dream. Work hard, reap the benefits**

Be wise now, retire well later. It is one of the biggest criticisms older folks have our the younger generations…”They just seem to be so entitled. They act like the universe owes them something.” But even in this critique, we can detect a lie…and that is the belief that retiring well, having wealth, having material possessions brings happiness. Because happiness is the ultimate goal.

So maybe your aim is to work hard to earn a good living, the goal is happiness. Maybe you are going to “take a year off” and backpack around Europe or put your time into starting up a band or scheme some other way to follow your heart…the goal is still the same…does this make me happy?

Well, the bible takes a pretty radical stance on this idea of happiness. We have already heard from the prophet Jeremiah this morning.

**SLIDE 6: Jeremiah 17:7 “Happy are those who trust in the LORD, who rely on the LORD.”**

“Happy are those who trust in the LORD, who rely on the LORD.” “But wait!” we want interject. Shouldn’t we be self-relient? Shouldn’t we be able to take care of ourselves and be independent? Isn’t that really what happiness entails? Jeremiah begs to differ. Trust and reliance not on ourselves, but in the LORD leads us to happiness. He goes on to describe it more fully: Those who trust in the LORD, “Will be like trees planted by the streams, whose roots reach down to the water. They won’t fear drought when it comes; their leaves will remain green. They won’t be stressed in the time of drought or fail to bear fruit.”

Doesn’t that sound like happiness? Keep in mind, Jeremiah is talking to people who live in a very dry and arid climate. They didn’t have 10,000 lakes and forests that seem to have no end. Water was very precious; it was not always in abundance. So to hear of a tree planted by a stream, which has an ongoing supply of water, was a picture that would bring a smile to the face of an ancient Israelite. And having access to that life giving water is happiness because there was always a danger and possibility of drought. I can recall last summer when our neighborhood was put on a watering ban due to the lack of rain at the time. And I remember thinking, “So, our grass is going to turn brown.” And it did. But I never worried about my family starving or anything like that. If you think we talk about the weather now, imagine what it must have been like for these people who were totally dependent on some rainfall. Living at the mercy of precipitation is a stressful way to live. Jeremiah addresses that directly. He says outright, when you trust in the LORD, your perspective, your worldview is going to be changed. Drought will not stress you out…other translations say, you will not be bothered or anxious…you will be happy and you will bear fruit.

But is this happiness the ultimate goal for Jeremiah? Or is it a side-effect? Is it something that happens on the way to something else?

**SLIDE 7: Psalm 16:9 “That’s why my heart celebrates and my mood is joyous; yes, my whole body will rest in safety because you won’t abandon my life to the grave; you won’t let your faithful follower see the pit.”**

Psalm 16 gives us more of a broad perspective. Verse 9, “That’s why my heart celebrates and my mood is joyous; yes, my whole body will rest in safety because you won’t abandon my life to the grave; you won’t let your faithful follower see the pit.” He says that his whole body is able to rest in joy because he trusts that God will not leave him alone in the clutches of death. There is more to it than that. There is more to this life than just this life!

**SLIDE 8 - There is more to this life than just this life!**

Secularism does not admit that however. Secularism teaches us to get as much as we can in the here and now. Those who trust in stuff, in wealth, in health, in travel, in novel experiences…they are happy! But what happens when the money runs out? What happens when the health runs out? Who could be happy then? Those who trust in the Lord.

Happiness is fleeting, it cannot be a goal. I am sure you have heard the phrase “moving the goalposts”. It’s the idea that an opposing team might move the goal in order to make winning more difficult for their opponent. It plays out in discussions or negotiations when one side seems to change the rules of the game while it is still ongoing. Here is an example from the comic Dilbert:



The boss ultimately wants to get rid of this employee so he moves the goalposts, he requires more and more qualifications. No matter how the employee answers, the boss is still going to demand more. This then is happiness. We will find that happiness is actually a cruel boss who simply demands more and more. Once we think we have entered into the blissful sphere of happiness, what happiness has to offer, the goalposts change and we realize what we really truly want is just out of reach, just a few more steps. Once we reach that new tier of happiness, we find that same trick is played once again. These days, we have access to more wealth and more possessions and more toys and more free time than any other era in history and yet, to be anxious is to be normal. It seems that for all our technology and all our higher standards of living, we are not happier than previous generations.

John Wesley, the founder of Methodism is credited as saying, “Men are unhappy because they are unholy.”

**SLIDE 10 - “Men are unhappy because they are unholy.”**

Can you imagine someone saying that today? Or diagnosing people in such a way? “Men are unhappy because they are unholy.” It’s not because they don’t have the right career or the right family situation or because they don’t have enough stuff. It’s because that don’t have enough holiness. Christianity cannot seem to let go of this link between happiness and holiness. In secularism of course happiness is based on our feelings, our preferences. If we increase that which we prefer, we decrease unhappiness. Christianity says, “Put aside the quest for happiness, step into a place of trust.” Jesus himself, in the sermon on the mount commands us to not worry. Why worry about eating and drinking and clothing and all the rest? God knows you need that stuff. Don’t you trust him? He takes cares of the birds and the flowers in the field after all. seek first the kingdom and all these things will be given to you as well.

The grand goal then, the one that will never move, the one that can apply to all people in all places at all times, is to seek the kingdom of God. Seek first his kingdom!

**SLIDE 11: Seek first his kingdom!**

This is the primary goal of life. This is our means of trust and so as well our happiness. Happiness is not the ultimate goal…it can never be…it is a moving target. But happiness is a side effect, an unavoidable reality for those who seek the kingdom and trust in God to provide.

So if you are feeling anxious, if you fear the drought that may be coming, if you have been tricked by the promise of the next thing that comes along guaranteeing your happiness, it’s time to apply the brakes, slow down and get planted. It’s time to seek first the kingdom of God. So how do we do that?

**SLIDE 12: Trust and obey for there’s no other way to be happy in Jesus**

Well I began this sermon with a song and I guess I will finish with a different song. This one is written from a biblical worldview. This song can offer a solution that accords with reality. It’s an old familiar chorus; “When we walk with the Lord, in the light of his word, what a glory he sheds on our way! While we do his good will, he abides with us still, and with all who will trust and

obey. Trust and obey for there’s no other way to be happy in Jesus, but to trust and obey.

For those of us who find we are not all that happy in Jesus, we can take some time out and ask, are we trusting? Are we obeying? Are we seeking his kingdom or our own priorities? Don’t live according to the shifting goals of happiness. Don’t accept stress and anxiety as a normal part of life. Trust in the God who loves you and plants you by the streams. Obey his word and do what he tells us to do. Trust and obey…there is no other way. And all these things, including happiness, will be given to you. Amen.