

“The Higher Happiness”

A sermon delivered July 25, 2010, at Foley UMC, by Dr. Lance Moore.

Colossians 2:2-3

“My purpose is that they may be encouraged in heart and united in love, so that they may have the full riches of complete understanding, in order that they may know the mystery of God, namely, Christ, in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge.”

Colossians 3:1-2

“Since, then, you have been raised with Christ, set your hearts on things above, where Christ is seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things.”

Colossians 3:12-14

“Therefore, as God's chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience. Bear with each other and forgive whatever grievances you may have against one another. Forgive as the Lord forgave you. And over all these virtues put on love, which binds them all together in perfect unity.”

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The famous comedian and neurotic film producer, Woody Allen, has had good fortune in a material sense: fame and acclaim, wealth and women—his wives have been far more beautiful than his homely face should expect—but despite such worldly success, he can't seem to be happy. He once said, “My only regret in life is that I wasn't somebody else.” He said that to get a laugh... and it was funny. But Woody Allen also knows it's true: he does not like his life, he has found little happiness and no lasting contentment.

How about you? Are you happy in your life, or would you rather be somebody else!? Like last Sunday, we're continuing to read

from the Letter to the Colossians. Scripture has an answer to the question of how do I find contentment and purpose in life, and the answer is that we must find a higher happiness.

Saint Paul wrote in Colossians 2:2, “My purpose is that they may be encouraged in heart and united in love....” Paul was successful in the monumental task of founding Christian churches because he understood the power of purposeful living. Paul wrote elsewhere that he had found “the secret of being content in all circumstances.” That secret he revealed to the young church at Colossae (3:2) when he said “Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things.”

Unfortunately, most people never set their minds on anything at all, much less lofty things. Most never discover their purpose in life. They have no direction, no goals, no meaningful reason for living.

Napoleon Hill—whose name I mentioned a few sermons back—spent many years interviewing the 500 wealthiest men in America for a book entitled Think and Grow Rich. The key to success, he said, was goal setting, having a plan. He also listed the 31 major causes of failure, and the number one cause of failure is the *lack* of a well-defined purpose in life. He wrote: “There is no hope of success for the person who does not have a central purpose, or definite goal at which to aim.”

What a terrible tragedy to live your life without purpose. I strongly recommend that you set goals for yourself... if nothing else, a “to do” list... a list of positive things you’d like to achieve both short term and long term. Recently, people have joked about having a “bucket list,” which is a list of important things you wish to do before you “kick the bucket.” And that’s probably a good thing to do. But friends, you also need to have a post-bucket list.

What I mean by that is, you need to have a future vision that extends beyond the confines of this material life. That vision needs to extend beyond the grave... so it needs to be an eternally-deep vision. That vision also needs to extend in width, beyond the narrow limits of material things, to the spiritual life that goes beyond the horizon of what the eyeball can see. Think of it this way: there's a song we used to sing in Vacation Bible School when I was a kid: "Deep and wide. Deep and wide. There's a fountain flowing deep and wide." And we had little hand gestures that went with it. Let's pretend we're kids again and sing it together, and make the hand motions! "Deep and wide. There's a fountain flowing deep and wide."

Now, when I was a kid, I liked that song, but I had NO idea what that song meant. Half of you who just sang it still have no idea what it means. I'm still not sure myself, but I think it either refers to the fountain of the blood and grace of Jesus Christ, or to the fountain of the spring of life mentioned in Revelation, or both. But here's what it symbolizes for me today, in this sermon: the fountain of the contented life needs to flow deep and flow wide. Deeper than the six foot grave, wider than the tunnel-vision of most humans who can only see the physical world right in front of them. Or another way to put it, using dimensional language, a higher happiness, a life that stretches to the heavens.

There is another great Christian song that speaks of the same vision with the same metaphor, the hymn:

"It Is Well With My Soul," by Horatio Spafford.

    "When peace like a river, attendeth my way,  
    When sorrows like sea billows roll;  
    Whatever my lot, Thou hast taught me to know,  
    It is well, it is well, with my soul...."

And my favorite line:

    "The sky, not the grave, is our goal."

***The sky, not the grave, is our goal!*** Spafford wrote those words in response to the fact that two of his very close relatives had died. And that is the profound boldness of the Christian message. A higher happiness attached to a higher reality. Again, it echoes Paul's words in Colossians: "set your hearts on things above... set your minds on things above, not on earthly things."

You've heard the phrase, used when someone jumps on something risqué or racy in an otherwise innocent statement, "Your mind is in the gutter!" Well, for most of us most of the time, our eyes and mind are in the metaphorical gutter alongside the discarded flotsam and jetsam of life. Too often we dwell in valley of shadows, our vision cast down. I'm reminded of a story my dad told of a man who found a silver dollar on the sidewalk. He became so excited about his fortunate find—this was fifty years ago when a dollar would buy a bag of groceries—that he resolved to always look down wherever he walked, to see what treasure he could find. After twenty years of looking down, he did manage to pick up thirty-four dollars and eighteen cents in change, twenty-eight lost buttons, fourteen plastic combs, and assorted other trash. He also ended up with serious neck, back and shoulder problems from his bad posture, until one day while looking down at the pavement, he stepped off the curb and was hit by a bus! It doesn't pay to spend your life looking down.

To those who suffer with depression, I do recommend therapy, medicine and prayer... but those "cures" are useless if we don't decide for ourselves to stop thinking dark, depressing thoughts! This is why Paul tells us in Colossians (1:13): "He has rescued us from the dominion of darkness...." And he talks about how our hope is "stored up for you in heaven...." ***The sky, not the grave, is our goal!*** Up is where you will find hope and happiness.

In 1883, a creative engineer named John Roebling was inspired... he had a vision to build a spectacular bridge connecting New York with Long Island. However, bridge building experts throughout the world thought that this was an impossible feat and told Roebling to forget the idea. It just could not be done. It was not practical. It had never been done before. But Roebling could not ignore the vision he had in his mind of this bridge. He thought about it constantly. After much discussion, he managed to convince his son, named Washington, a young engineer, that the bridge in fact could be built. Working together for the first time, the father and son developed concepts of how it could be accomplished and how the obstacles could be overcome. With great excitement and inspiration, they hired their crew and began to build their dream bridge. The project started well, but when it was only a few months underway a tragic accident on the site took the life of John Roebling. In the same accident, the son, Washington, was injured and left with brain damage, which resulted in him not being able to walk or talk or even move.

You can imagine the down-looking critics: "We told them so." "Crazy men chasing their wild dreams." Everyone had a negative comment to make and felt that the project should be scrapped since the Roeblings were the only ones who had known the plan. In spite of his handicap, Washington was never discouraged and still had a burning desire to complete the bridge. But he couldn't talk. As he lay on his bed in his hospital room, with the sunlight streaming through the windows, a gentle breeze blew the flimsy white curtains apart and he was able to see the sky and the tops of the trees outside for just a moment. It seemed to be a message for him not to give up. Suddenly an idea hit him. All he could do was move one finger so he slowly developed a code of communication with his wife. He tapped out his own version of a "Morse code" on his wife's arm and over time she conveyed messages to the engineers of what to do. For 13 years Washington tapped out his instructions with his finger on his

wife's arm, until the bridge was finally completed. Today the spectacular Brooklyn Bridge stands in all its glory as a tribute to the triumph of one man's indomitable spirit and his determination not to be defeated by circumstances.

Did you hear the important line in that story? He caught a glimpse of the sky and the tops of the trees! Even after his father died, the one with the original vision, the son kept looking up.

What will make you happy long term? What makes you deeply content? What is your purpose in being here? Are you making significant improvement in the lives of those around you? Are you looking up, or down? ***The sky, not the grave, is our goal!***

Anthony Campolo surveyed a large group of 95-year-olds, asking them "If you could live your life over, what would you do differently?" The most common response: "We would do things that would last beyond our lifetime." ***The sky, not the grave, is our goal!***

If you listen to Jesus, he will ask you to follow him to a higher purpose, and a higher happiness, which will last beyond this lifetime. You can make your mind up now to serve God. By lending a helping hand to others. By living righteously. By giving of your time, talents, and treasure. God has a plan and purpose for you. Deep and wide and high, there is a fountain flowing. Revelation 22 says: "Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life... flowing from the throne of God."

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