

## *“The Secret to a Happy Life, Part 1”*

*Ephesians 5:21-6:9*

First Presbyterian Church, Corpus Christi, TX

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What is the secret to a happy life? I'm sure you've thought about it. That's one of those questions that all of us wrestles with. In the Declaration of Independence Thomas Jefferson wrote that the pursuit of happiness is one of the unalienable rights given to us by God. But that doesn't answer the question. A Google search on “the secret to a happy life” will return over 800,000 web pages with some very interesting answers. For example, a recent *Huffington Post* article states that the secret to happy life is believing in yourself and “understanding that the Universe is here to support you.” I'm not making this up. The article says that the role of the Universe “is to help you put the conditions together based on what you say you want. However it can only support you as much as you support you.”<sup>1</sup> I'm not really sure what that means but I'm pretty sure that if that's the secret to a happy life it's still a secret.

Another article, this time from the *UK Telegraph*, says that the secret to a happy life is simple. All it takes is six hours of sleep a night, seven hours of work, two hours playing with your kids every day, a 20 minute commute to work, five cooked meals every week, exercising several days a week, eating organic food, going on four shopping sprees a month, eating four servings of fruits and vegetables a day, going out with your friends one night a week, and taking two vacations a year. Simple. Not surprising was that more than half of those surveyed said it was difficult to achieve a balanced life.<sup>2</sup>

Something else that's not surprising, at least to those of us who follow Jesus, is that the Bible DOES have the secret to a happy life. And it's not really a secret. There are three areas in our lives that can either be joy-givers or joy-

stealers. These are areas that can be very rewarding or very challenging, sometimes both at the same time. These three areas are marriage, parenting, and work. Our passage this morning from Ephesians is about the secret to a happy life and guess what – it's about all three: marriage, parenting, and work.

Let me begin by acknowledging that like these three areas, this passage itself can be a joy-giver or a joy-stealer. Many people don't make it past verse 22, “wives submit to your own husbands.” That verse has been misunderstood and misused and so many people never hear the real message. So this morning I am going to work through this passage in reverse and if we're lucky we'll run out of time before we get to verse 22.

Here we go. “Bondservants (literally slaves), obey your earthly masters with fear and trembling, with a sincere heart, as you would Christ.” The ESV translates this as bondservants instead of slaves because of the connotations the word “slave” brings to mind. Slavery in the ancient Roman empire was very different than the slavery of 19<sup>th</sup> century America and Europe. It's estimated that there were 60 million slaves in the Roman empire, maybe as much as a third of the population of the larger cities. Also, slavery was not permanent. In fact most slaves could expect to become free and according to some ancient documents almost half of all slaves were free before they were 30 years old. In fact it was quite common for people to sell themselves into slavery as a way of becoming Roman citizens.

Today a better way to read this passage would be “employees, obey your earthly employers.” When we apply these commands to employees and employers we find that God cares about how we go about our work. Actually He cares about our *attitude* about our work. Many years ago a man came upon some bricklayers working on a building. He asked the

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<sup>1</sup> [https://www.huffingtonpost.com/howard-falco/the-secret-to-a-happy-lif\\_1\\_b\\_10633906.html](https://www.huffingtonpost.com/howard-falco/the-secret-to-a-happy-lif_1_b_10633906.html)

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/uknews/8032943/Secret-to-a-happy-life-is-a-simple-one.html>

first one, “what are you doing?” The man snarled, “I’m laying bricks. That’s my job.” So he asked the second one the same question. He snapped, “can’t you see? I’m building a wall.” Finally the man asked the third bricklayer, “what are you doing?” With a spark in his eye the third man replied, “I’m building a great cathedral.” All three were doing the same thing but with different attitudes.

Paul tells us that when we work we are to carry out our work as if we’re working directly for God. Whatever we do we should do our very best because it can point people to Christ. Paul uses three adverbs to describe how we are to go about our work. By the way, this doesn’t just apply to the work we do for pay. This is how you should go about any kind of work you do where you are working under someone else. First, we are to do it *respectfully*. “Obey your earthly masters with fear and trembling.” Fear and trembling is merely an idiom for showing great respect for the superior’s position and authority.

Next, we are to work *sincerely*, “with a sincere heart...not as people-pleasers.” The key here is to focus on Christ. We are to do everything as if we’re doing it for Jesus himself. One author put it like this: “It is possible...to cook a meal as if Jesus Christ were going to eat it, or to spring-clean the house as if Jesus Christ were to be the honored guest. It is possible for teachers to educate children, for doctors to treat patients and nurses to care for them, for [attorneys] to help clients, shop assistants to serve customers, accountants to audit books and secretaries to type letters as if in each case they were serving Jesus Christ.”

The third thing the Bible commands us is to work *cheerfully*, “rendering service with a good will as to the Lord and not to man.” Most people are not very good at hiding when they hate their job or just simply don’t care. Paul says Christians should not be like that. We are to work cheerfully. The reason is that we know “that whatever good anyone does, this he will receive back from the Lord.”

The exception to obeying our earthly bosses would be if we’re asked to do something illegal or immoral. God does not expect us to obey anyone who asks us to do something that goes against God’s revealed will.

Thankfully, God doesn’t just stop with rules for employees. Verse 9 says, “Masters, do the same to them, and stop your threatening.” In other words, superiors are commanded to treat those under them respectfully, sincerely, and cheerfully. The reason is that in God’s eyes all people are equal. We don’t all have equal position or authority but we all have equal value. Paul reminds us to keep that in mind when we deal with others, seeing them as someone that Jesus died for.

Backing up to the beginning of chapter 6 we come to the relationship between children and parents. “Children, obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right.” This section is short and to the point. Children are to obey. Why? Because it’s the right thing to do. Why is it the right thing to do? Because God says so. And because it results in living a longer life and receiving God’s blessings. The child who obeys his parents is likely to have fewer accidents and injuries. Parents know better than children what can hurt them. Second, children who obey their parents are more likely to develop healthy characteristics that they will carry with them through life. It’s important to remember that Paul is not just talking about outward obedience. Like the relationship between the employee and employer, he’s talking about the attitude of the heart. Honoring parents involves a deep love and respect that leads to a desire to obey. This attitude continues into adulthood where we are love and honor our parents our whole life.

Paul then addresses the parents. In each of these situations God speaks to both sides. He says, “do not provoke your children to anger, but bring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord.” The anger he’s warning us about is not just our kids getting mad about something. If you’re actually parenting there will be times when your kids

get mad. They're called the teen years. The warning here is not to cause deep, long-term resentment and bitterness. How do parents do that? By being unreasonable or unfair or simply uncaring. All three of those show a lack of love. Instead we are to "bring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord." Literally we are to nourish them, teaching and correcting in a gentle, loving way. As Proverbs 22:6 says, "Train up a child in the way he should go; even when he is old he will not depart from it."

Well you're in luck. We don't have enough time to get to husbands and wives so we will look at that next week. In the mean time spend some time thinking about all of your relationships – the ones you have now and the ones you've had in the past. Think about those that went well and were a blessing and think about those that were difficult. What was it that made the good ones good? And what is the secret to a happy life?

*Amen.*