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Presentation Transcript
Being Happy – Happiness and Engagement
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Bill here for LifeResource Ministries.

Today we're continuing our series on *Happiness*. We're on the second of the series and the title is *Happiness and Engagement*.

You'll recall – if you saw, heard or read our first in this series that seeing happiness as a goal doesn't really work. If we ask, "What would make me happy?" and we find the answer to be "a new job with a nicer boss," for example, and then we go out looking for that job, and find it, we're going to be elated for a while, but then that genetic happiness set point starts to kick in as we adjust to the new place and the new people. We come back to our baseline of happiness, even though we're better off. Also, our brains are wired to look for potential problems and fix them. And as we pass the euphoria of a new job, we, once again, begin to look for things that need to be fixed – problems that need to be solved – potential threats to our income stream, productivity and sense of self. So no matter what happens, we won't stay at that high level of satisfaction for long. And that's probably a good thing. We can look at nature and see how that works.

Think of all the animals that live in the wild. There's a name for the ones who play and frolic and are oblivious to problems and threats. The name is *Dinner*. The same is true for us. I was watching one of these Alaskan reality shows yesterday. It was way north of the Arctic Circle, near the shore of the Arctic Ocean. A construction crew was winterizing the homes in a small community there. But the polar bears kept walking off the ice into the town. The workers would fire guns, turn on police sirens, etc. to scare them away. But sometimes, they didn't act like they wanted to run, so there was an ever present threat there. They pointed out over and over again that the apex predator on the planet is the polar bear. One of the workers said, "You have to keep your head on a swivel all the time and work in groups so you can have each other's backs."

When I work with police and border patrol people in my counseling practice, they usually come because they've been traumatized by events at work. And I don't try to take their anxiety down to zero. We leave a little bit there, because it keeps them alert. We don't want them skipping down the street humming, "Oh what a beautiful morning, o what a beautiful day," while a gunfight is about to erupt.

So a little bit of anxiety is good. Making plans for our own safety and needs is good. You know, we need to wear our seat belts, eat enough fruits and vegetables, get enough sleep, lock the doors at night, stay on top of auto maintenance, stay on top of office politics so we don't get blindsided by the predators there. We need to stay away from angry mobs at city hall. You know, the Bible has a lot to say about what fools do. They don't stay away from trouble. They take on unnecessary risks. They don't work hard to attend to their work. They're prone to relaxing and sleeping when they ought to be producing. And they hang out with troublesome people. So we need to be aware of these things and stay safe. That's what anxiety can do to help us with that. On the other hand, if all we do is maintain a high level of vigilance, our focus can become very narrow. Anxiety is *not* a good environment for creativity or relationship. Happiness and optimism are much better for those states. But how, when we have so many problems, are we going to be optimistic and happy – and especially when we have a low set point?

The young woman who was coming to see me for a fairly long time was exceptionally gifted in many areas – very bright. She could accomplish anything she set her mind to do – I'm sure of it – but she was plagued by her past – fearful and negative. Her potential was covered with a blanket of anxiety. She didn't have time to be creative. She was too busy being afraid. Once we got the fearful events of her past processed, she began to blossom. She finished her Bachelor's, was accepted for a study program in Europe, published a book and became a social activist for women who were abused in the same way she was. Once her fears were reduced, she became happier, and braver and, as a result, more creative.

So, summing up this positive-negative thing then, there needs to be a balance between happiness and anxiety. It's not good to be only happy or only be anxious. What helps us live at or above our natural baseline then? How do we rise above that? Well, we said forty percent of our happiness is depends on the choices we make – and I would say, more specifically, in two areas of life. If you recall, Dr. Martin Seligman – we quoted him last time – said that happiness was comprised of three elements – pleasure, engagement and meaning.

Pleasure is that feel-good part of life – you know, a nice massage, a good dinner, driving a nice car, buying new clothes, taking a run. You know, so many people focus only on this one aspect. They long to get out of work so they can go home and take their run. That's not a bad thing in some ways, but, if all we focus on is the physical things that we're going to do next, or the things that we enjoy, then we're not really going to be as happy as we could

be, because there are two other really important areas. And so many people focus only on this one aspect, which is important, but the least important of the three.

So the next one he talked about is *engagement*. And that's about living a good life with work, family, friends, interests and hobbies. And then, *meaning*, as he defined it, is about using our talents to contribute to a greater good.

So, we're going to look at *engagement* today. What kind of life are you living? Are you engaged at work? It's interesting to me to watch people work.

We had a carpet cleaner come to the house a while back. John showed up on time. He was wearing these baggy athletic shorts and athletic t-shirt and running shoes – nothing like you'd expect a service man to wear on a job site. I'm used to seeing a brown shirt with "John" on the label. He also had large tattoos on all his limbs. However, he was polite and he engaged us well. We showed him what we wanted cleaned and he politely and articulately explained what he was going to do, about how long it would take, and his estimate on how well it would work. And then he got to it without any fooling around. He worked efficiently, did a great job – way better than anybody else has done in way less time. When I complimented him about halfway through on how it was looking, he smiled and nodded and went right back after it. John was engaged in his work. He was focused on doing a good job. And he did such a good job, if he had wanted to wear a pink tutu, it would have been fine with me. His athletic dress was probably much more comfortable for him to work in than more conventional clothing. I surmised that it was either his business or he was a partner in a business, because he was highly motivated and very engaged in what he was doing.

By contrast, several years ago, I went to Santa Fe – that's the state capital of New Mexico – to turn in some papers to a state office. The building was a large multi-storied facility that housed a good many of the state's operations. I found the office I needed. It took quite a while to speak to someone, though I was the only there needing help. On the way out, I took a wrong turn and wandered up and down halls for a while. Every office I looked into showed the same scene – people away from their desks, talking, phones ringing with nobody answering them. No work was getting done. These people were engaged, but they were not engaged in work! They were there to collect a paycheck rather than to make a contribution. I'm sure you've met them. They're the ones who act like they're doing you a favor when they do their job. Do you know what that means for them? Right. They will not be as happy as they could be. Floating through their life at work – disengaged – equals less satisfaction, less self-respect and a more self-centered focus.

Let's look at what Solomon said about work in Ecclesiastes 5:18 through 20.

Ecclesiastes 5:18-20 – *Behold, what I have seen to be good and fitting is to eat and drink and find enjoyment in all the toil with which one toils under the sun.*

You know, when I told John I thought he was doing a good job, he enjoyed that. He smiled big! And then he went right back to it. He wanted more enjoyment. He was doing a good job.

V-18 – *So just to eat and drink and find enjoyment in all the toil with which one toils under the sun the few days of his life that God has given him, for this is his lot. Everyone, also, to whom God has given wealth, and possessions, and power to enjoy them, and to accept his lot and rejoice in his toil, this is the gift of God, for he will not remember the days of his life, because God keeps him occupied with joy in his heart.*

You know, when you're having fun, time flies, right? That's what this is saying.

I think about my life here in Albuquerque, New Mexico – we moved here nineteen years ago – and the time has just flown by – and much of it because we were moving toward a goal of a private counseling practice and a ministry where we could help people in the church we belong to. So I think I'm a living example that scripture, in a way.

The way we find enjoyment in our work is to do a good job. When I was at college, I got a job working on the grounds crew. They really did a smart thing there. They assigned people areas of the campus as their own to keep tidy. I was responsible for half a city block of dorms and faculty housing. If a windstorm came up and blew a lot of leaves off the trees, or branches, it was my job to get out there and clean it up. And I was helping to make the college a beautiful-looking place – a show place. I valued that and appreciated the opportunity to do that. That's a much better way to work than to put in twenty hours a week of mindless raking and sweeping. I could engage the challenge because of the responsibility.

I also had to think about my work as part of an overall plan. That's another way to engage your work. By working while I went to college, I could graduate without a college bill, if I played my cards right. So I wasn't just keeping part of the campus clean. I was building a foundation for a debt-free life after college. To see the greater personal reason for working is a way to engage, too, isn't it?

In my work, I meet a lot of people who are on welfare. Some of them find welfare to be a blessing. I know this lady who has several children. She works at a call center – minimal job. She has a lot of Medicaid to help her kids with their medical bills. I don't know what else she gets, but, for her – she's stated this many times to me – it's been a huge benefit to her. So, when I see so many people working the system – not like this lady, but others – working the system to get more than what they're really allowed, I worry about the effect that's going to have on them. There is a ton of research out there to show that when we're not productive, we're less happy. You know, when you're living off somebody else and you're not really doing your part, it's not a good feeling. Some people have kidded

themselves into thinking that's the way to live and that's one of the reasons why they're so frustrated and unhappy. Work is a vital part of mental health and happiness. The more engaged we are with it, the more helpful it is to us, also. So choose an attitude that allows you to engage in even routine work and you will be happier.

Did you know that that attitude will also keep you from getting bored at work? Did you know that? Bored, it turns out, is a choice! The way we choose not to get bored is to engage – more about how to do that in the weeks to come.

There is a saying that “you can pick your friends, but not your family.” So let's talk about engaging the family for a while. I was talking to a woman some time back who was at odds with her sister and her mother. She was really angry with them. And, at the same time, she desperately wanted to be rid of the anger and to be close to them. How does that work?

Well, when we're born, we come hard-wired for two relationships – mom and dad. All other relationships grow out of what we learn from relating to them. Even our relationship with God grows out of that. So God has bestowed on parents a pretty important responsibility. This woman's mother was always angry with her and dismissing her when she was a child. She asked me one day if God would ever forgive her for the things that she'd done that were wrong. And, in my mind, I asked the question, “Is it a wonder that she found it hard to trust that God would forgive her, since her mother never had?” That's how it works.

A man also asked me once how to get his relationships back with his two teen-aged daughters. They were living with his ex-wife and his version of that story was that she constantly trashed him behind his back to his kids, so they disrespected him. I have a feeling there was probably more to it than that – and he even admitted that. He wasn't trying to hide it. But he put more weight, I think, on what his ex-wife said about him than on what he'd done to cause problems. But he said that everything he tried to do wasn't working. So I explained to him that his daughters also wanted a relationship with him, just like he wanted one with them. It was wired in. But they had probably gotten out of touch with it because of all the anger they had toward him for whatever reason. And I suggested that he stop throwing money at them and begin engaging them in relationship at whatever level he could. He said, “Well, it's impossible.” And I said, “Well, do they have phones? Can you text them?” And he said, “Yeah, they do.” And I said, “Well, just every few days, send them a text and say, ‘Hey, I just wanted to know how you're doing and let you know that I'm thinking about you.’ Try to say something personal to each one of them. Don't make it a book – just a little jogger, so they know you're out there and you care about them. And when they ask you for stuff, talk to them about responsibility and what they need to do to earn your trust.”

A fourteen-year-old came to my office once, whose mother had just committed suicide, and her father was a drug addict and lived a long way off. Her adult cousin had taken her in, but she was, essentially, alone. It took about four years, but she grieved the loss of her mother and came to terms with her father's breach of faith. I asked her if she still needed to come and she said, "I think I do. Sometimes I get a little whacky." And I didn't know what she meant by that, but I got a clear picture of it a year later when she told me her boyfriend had asked her to marry him. She was nineteen by that time. And she said, "I cried for six hours." I said, "Why did you do that?" She said, "My mother wasn't there to know I'm engaged." She said, "My boyfriend's mother really loves me, but it's just not the same." So even though her family is not like we want it to be, we will still benefit if we make an effort to engage.

You know, more than with friends, parents and children are bound to each other. Siblings are bound to each other. So there's a genetic connection there – a cellular connection. And, if we work at it, quite often we can restore the relationship. Now, I know some people that can't be close to their relatives because they're too hurtful to them, but barring that situation, there's always hope, because of the thing that God has put in our hearts – to be close to family. You know, even if our families are not like we want them to be, we can still benefit from that effort.

We have a ton of material on family on our Website, if you want to delve deeper. Just go there and search for that or just look through the list of topics.

Now let's talk about our friends and colleagues. Let's look at a scripture related to engaging with friends in John 15:15. Jesus said this:

John 15:15 – *No longer do I call you servants, for the servant does not know what his master is doing. But I've called you friends, for all that I've heard from My Father, I have made known to you.*

So this is the relationship that God is after. It's His goal. He wants to be friends with us. He doesn't want to be our boss. He doesn't want to be our overlord, although He *is* our Lord and we will always be under His authority. But more than that, He wants to be friends with us. So this is Jesus talking straight to the disciples the night before He died. It's all out there and He was engaging them. And He engages us by those words, too. And what are we going to do with it? Are we going to respond and engage back? Or are we just going to blow it off? What are we going to do?

How do we make friends with God – and other people, for that matter? Proverbs 18:24.

Proverbs 18:24 – *A man who has friends must himself be friendly.*

Most of the time, when I hear people talking about friendship, they say things like, “I don’t have any friends,” or “Nobody like me,” or “I’m lonely.” That’s usually a sign of a lack of engagement. Friendship is a two-way street. You know, you’re mother has to take care of you, even if you’re being a pill. But friendship is not like that. It’s a *mutual* relationship. And it’s good practice for marriage, because marriage requires mutuality as well.

A number of years ago, I considered myself a social person. I talked to many of my peers on a regular basis. One day I realized I was the only one doing the calling. I thought, “Maybe I’m being some kind of nuisance or something,” but as it turned out, it was much deeper than that. I had become *persona non grata* in the organization I was in. I had broken some unspoken rules, and, as we all know, organizations do not forgive that. So these people, I discovered – you know, I sometimes think I was really dense about that, because that went on for a long time before I figured it out – but those people are no longer – and some of them probably never were – my friends. I liked them, but once I broke the rules, it wasn’t any longer mutual. Oh well. I have fewer friends now, but the friends I have are real.

If we want to have more friends, we need to get out there and engage. In our society, it’s hard to do that sometimes. I hear people complaining about that a lot. So where do you go? How do find friends? On the Internet? Twitter? That’s not really a very good way to do things. It’s okay to meet people long distance, but you never really get to know them in the way you really need to, if you’re going to have a friend. So where do you go? Well, a lot of people tell me they go to bars. But there you meet the kind of people who like to drink. So go to a bar of drinking as your passion and you’ll meet other people with the same interest. If you want to meet people who are interested in the same things you’re interested in, join the knitting club, if that’s what you like to do; or, if you have a motorcycle, join the motorcycle club; or, if you’re a golfer, the golf club; or, if you’re a science geek, the science club; or go work in the soup kitchen, or volunteer to help disabled people. Go back to school and you’ll meet all kinds of people that are interested in what you’re interested in. Friendship is based on mutual interest most of the time, so go where people who are interested in what you’re interested in go.

I met a man once who found a wife that way. He was a deacon. He liked to serve. That’s what deacons do. They take care of people. So, his wife died and after several years, he was lonely, so he decided he would try to get married. So he started going to neighboring churches where they were having socials. Instead of staying out on the floor, he would go to the kitchen to see who was doing the work and doing the serving. And he kept running into this same woman. “She was everywhere – always working,” he said. So he would offer to help her. And that was all it took. It wasn’t long and they were engaged and then married. And that was many years ago now and they’re still happily married, because they had that love of service that connected them.

Since we are, at the cellular level, relational people who reach out to engage others, when we do that, we tend to be happier. Now, you introverts, don't feel guilty. You don't need to have a thousand friends. One good one is worth a bucket load of people who won't call you back. Did you know every time you smile at somebody there's a tiny little squirt of growth hormone that shot into your bloodstream that enlivens your cells and makes you healthier? Did you know that your heart rate drops a little bit? You calm down. Your blood pressure goes down a little bit? It's true. We were created for relationship. God wants to be our friend. And so He's designed a life where we can practice making friends.

Changing topics now, let's talk about engaging with interests. People who don't have many interests are usually less happy and more anxious. And there are a number of reasons for this. When we're anxious, we more tightly focus on the source of our anxiety – you know, the problem. We don't have time to focus on interests, friends, family, job, etc. When we don't have interests, we tend to focus on our problems more. So it's a mutually negative thing. There's two ways to get to the same place – focus on problems or don't have interests. They both get you to the same place. When we don't have many interests, we sit around and think about all the problems we have. Interests take us away from that.

Most people – this is another reason – most people have at least two skill sets, making them good at two things – much more so than all the other things that they do. If we don't use both of those, we're not going to be as happy and fulfilled because we're not using our talents. We're not getting the satisfaction from them. Most jobs only require one of those skill sets, leaving one unused.

I'm a therapist. Guess which is my strongest skill set. Well, social. Right. Some of my clients would probably disagree that, but be that as it may. My second strongest skill set has to do with mechanics. If, in addition to my work as a therapist, I'm also fixing the garage door, or drilling holes in something, or welding something, or driving something, or building something, I'm happier. I recall that just before I quit my job of twenty-eight years and started a new career, I was intensely unhappy. What did I do? I built a rock-crawler. I didn't sit down and think, "I'm unhappy. What can I do to make myself happier? I need to do something mechanical." No, it just happened. It was a way to feel some satisfaction when my job was causing frustration.

So, interests away from the job can be very helpful to help us be happier people, if they engage our strengths. If all you have is your job, and it's terrible, then you're really up the creek. It's important to love our work and be happy, but when we can't, then using other skills in some productive way can make a difference. In any event, if we're using our skills, we're going to be happier people.

Well, we just scratched the surface of this aspect of the happiness topic – which was *engagement* – but there are some things to think about there. I don't know about you, but

even though I know all these things, and have for a long time, I need to be reminded of them from time to time.

So that's it for today. Check back in two weeks and we're going to cover the most important thing in being happy. Until then, engage, engage, engage!