

Happiness Habits – Part 1*¹
Lamentations 3:1-18
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St. John United Methodist Church
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David Beckett, D.Min.

Why in the world would I choose this scripture for a sermon on happiness? What a depressing and angry passage of scripture! This is no sanitized portion of scripture. It's real and raw, just like life is for many of us today. The main reason I chose it was because of verse 17: "My soul is bereft of peace; I have forgotten what happiness is." This is the only time that the word, "happiness", appears in the Bible. We see "happy" 57 times, but "happiness" only this once and it's not a happy context.

Have you forgotten what happiness is? What is the happiness factor in your life right now? On a scale of 1-10 with 10 being ultimate and ecstatic happiness, how happy are you? From this scripture it would appear this guy has a zero! On what does your happiness depend? Maybe you need your family around to feel happy. Perhaps you need to be outside in the wilderness to be happy. Maybe you need to shop in order to experience happiness.

Psychologists have done enough studies on human relationships and specifically marriage that they can predict relationship success fairly accurately. Their research has gleaned ten habits or behaviors that are present in happy, healthy relationships. In fact they can test couples in premarital counseling and predict which ones will end up in divorce with, and this will astound you, 94% accuracy!

If you want your marriage...if you want your interpersonal relationships to be healthy and happy, you will want to build these qualities in your life. They are divided into two categories: 1) When you feel misunderstood or mistreated; and 2) Building the emotional bond. Today we will deal with feeling misunderstood. There are six habits we all need to have successful marriages and relationships.

1. When you feel misunderstood or mistreated...AVOID A JUDGMENTAL ATTITUDE. Research suggests that we often trigger defensiveness in others before we open our mouths. In other words defensiveness is a bodily reaction before it comes out as words. Do you know the triggers that cause you to be defensive? The first step is to become aware of what words, actions, or looks that set us off.

Maybe it will help to understand what is happening in the human brain. Neurologists tell us that there are three parts of the brain that control certain functions. One part is where we have conscious and rational thought. Another is where we have emotional responses. A third is the brainstem or reptilian brain where our survival processes reside. We need our reptilian brain to kick in while driving at night and seeing a moose dart on the road so we can quickly hit the brakes. That's not the time to think long and hard about which action we should take. It's an automatic survival response.

But in a relationship it is not helpful to use this reactive part of the brain. Let's say that your spouse brings up the subject of your inability to be reconciled with your estranged brother. This is one of your triggers and immediately and unconsciously you

¹ Adapted from the work of Brent J. Atkinson. From a document obtained by Chris Reynolds, MS, October, 2008.

defend yourself against discomfort. You make a derogative remark or you get up and leave. Reptilian brain response is automatic and reactive. It cannot be inventive or creative. In a survival situation we need a response that is immediate. In a healthy marriage we need responses that are not reactive, but thoughtful and reflective.

The problem is that reptilian responses are more focused on our needs than our spouse's needs. Because reptilian responses are faster than thinking processes we will act before we think when confronted with anxiety. In such a defensive, threatened state, we are incapable of being reasonable and loving. In such a state issues are either black or white, right or wrong. In such a state we often over focus on others and their weaknesses. We blame and falsely criticize.

2. The second mark of a healthy relationship when you feel misunderstood or mistreated is that you **STAND UP FOR YOURSELF WITHOUT PUTTING THE OTHER PERSON DOWN**. People who succeed in their relationships know that they don't have to prove the other wrong in order to ask him or her to be willing to consider an alternative way of doing something. Happiness happens in relationships where people make it easy for the other to be respected. When you have disagreements do you show respect for the other person? Or does respect go out the window because you are driven to win at all costs?

Psychologists at the University of Denver studied newlyweds over the first decade of marriage. They found a very subtle but telling difference at the beginning of the relationships. Among couples who would ultimately stay together, 5 out of every 100 comments made about each other were putdowns. Among couples who would later split, 10 of every 100 comments were insults. That gap magnified over the following decade, until couples heading downhill were flinging five times as many cruel and invalidating comments at each other as happy couples.²

3. **FINDING THE UNDERSTANDABLE PART** is the third habit in happy relationships. When disagreements arise most of us tend to think of our own positions as reasonable and the other person's position as unreasonable. But at some point in the argument healthy people will manage to find something understandable about what the other person is saying or wanting.

An old story tells of a company attempting to start a new pension plan, which required 100% participation. Every employee signed up except one. No amount of argument could get this person to change his mind. Finally, the president of the company called the man into his office. Here is a copy of the proposed pension plan and here is a pen, he said. "Sign up or you're fired." Whereupon the man immediately picked up the pen and signed his name. The president of the company then said, I don't understand why you refused to sign until now. What was your problem? The man replied, "You're the first person who explained it to me clearly."

In a disagreement healthy people will try to find something in the other person's argument they can understand.

The fourth habit in healthy relationships is **GIVE EQUAL REGARD**. People who are destined to succeed easily accept their partner's influence. In marriages that fail,

² U.S. News & World Report, February 21, 1994, p. 67.

spouses often are only willing to accept influence if they judge their spouse's reasoning to be compelling. The problem is that, for most of us, our partner's reasoning seldom seems as worthy as our own! Reasoning that fits your values and priorities will always seem more compelling than reasoning based on other values or priorities. Studies suggest that, in almost every marriage spouses have at least some different values or priorities when it comes to issues such as how much money should be spent on certain things, or how organized should our lives be, or how much and what kind of discipline should be used with the kids, or how much time should be spent with our extended families. Giving equal regard can happen when we find a constructive way to deal with these differences.

As a new bride, Mary moved into a small ranch house with her new husband, Jack. When she got there she put a shoebox on a shelf in the closet and asked her husband never to touch it. For fifty years Jack left the box alone, until Mary was old and dying. One day when he was putting their affairs in order, he found the box again and thought it might hold something important. On opening it, he found two doilies and \$82,500 in cash. He took the box to her and asked about the contents. "My mother gave me that box the day we married," she explained. "She told me to make a doily to help ease my frustrations every time I got mad at you." Jack was very touched that in 50 years she'd only been mad at him twice. "What about the \$82,500?" he asked. "Oh, that's the money I made selling the doilies."

The fifth habit is OFFERING ASSURANCE. When you have a relationship history of misunderstandings and hurts it is natural to assume the other will be critical of your opinions in the future. People in happy, healthy relationships assure the other often. Rather than debating whether the other's worries or fears are legitimate, healthy people take them at face value and simply offer assurance. For example, rather than saying something like, "You worry about everything!" or "I'm not the only one who spends money around here!", they will say something like, "I don't want to be the cause of your worry. I just don't know what to do, because we worry about opposite things."

A couple married for 15 years began having more than usual disagreements. They wanted to make their marriage work and agreed on an idea the wife had. For one month they planned to drop a slip in a "Fault" box. The boxes would provide a place to let the other know about daily irritations. The wife was diligent in her efforts and approach: "leaving the jelly top off the jar," "wet towels on the shower floor," "dirty socks not in hamper," on and on until the end of the month. After dinner, at the end of the month, they exchanged boxes. The husband reflected on what he had done wrong. Then the wife opened her box and began reading. They were all the same, the message on each slip was, "I love you!" Sometimes it is more important to offer assurance than to criticize.

Finally, when you feel misunderstood or mistreated, IDENTIFY AND EXPLAIN WHAT IS AT STAKE. Happy, healthy people realize that the reasons they are upset or having trouble doing what their spouse wants sometimes runs deeper than the present situation. Often there is something bigger at stake. Your ability to explain the underlying reasons for being upset will help your partner become more cooperative and understanding. At some point during an argument people destined for success pause and take the conversation to a different level.

When you and I feel misunderstood or mistreated these are the six habits present in healthy happy relationships. Next Sunday we will complete the list of ten habits by examining four habits that strengthen the emotional bond.

I want to return to scripture as we close. In our scripture for today this individual rails against God with rage and bitterness. But it is not the end of the story. Read on. Beginning in verse 21 we read, "I have hope. The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases: his mercies never end. They are new every morning; great is your faithfulness. "The Lord is my portion," says my soul, "therefore I will hope in him."

No matter how dark it may feel. No matter how broken our relationships. No matter how desperate we feel. With God in our lives there is always hope!