

The Reverend Frank Haggard's  
Message to  
Westminster Presbyterian Church  
Sunday, April 18, 2010

**HAPPINESS: A FEELING OR A GIFT?**

**Mark 8:31-38**

You don't have to be a gambler to know what a roulette wheel is. But even a gambler might not know how the game of roulette originated. Roulette is an old French word meaning 'small or little wheel.' The roulette wheel is small or little in comparison to a much greater wheel, the wheel of fortune which supposedly spins for all time determining the fortunes and misfortunes of every human being. Originally roulette wheels were not used by gamblers for betting but by fortune-tellers to cast your horoscope or predict your future. The fortune-teller's little wheel or, in French, "roulette" was brought to carnivals throughout Europe. There were symbols on this wheel which you will still find on the "wheel-of-fortune card" in a pack of Tarot cards used by modern-day fortune-tellers. These symbols signified important events in a person's life: marriage, parenthood, choice of profession, success, failure, longevity, tragedy, death. By spinning the roulette and noting at what points on the circumference of the wheel it came to rest fortune-tellers claimed to be able to predict what the future held for you, good or bad. There was one fundamental law governing the wheel of fortune and the destiny of all people: "what goes up must come down" or "those who rise to the top will eventually be brought low", or "all success is temporary and all happiness is fleeting; today's success brings tomorrow's failure, the pleasure of now is a prelude to the pain of later."

Needless to say, roulette and fortune-telling were not welcomed by the Church. The Church's main objection was that a person's life, each success or failure, long-life or a short life, were in the hands of God, not a result of mere chance, luck, or accident. The Old Testament explicitly and vehemently condemns fortune-telling which it called divination, sooth-saying, or sorcery: "No one shall be found among you . . . who practices divination, or is a sooth-sayer, or an augur, or a sorcerer, or one who casts spells, or who consults ghosts

or spirits, or who seeks oracles from the dead. For whoever does these things is abhorrent to the Lord." As far as ancient Israel and the Church were concerned, the future belonged to God and God would reveal enough of its content to strengthen our faith and inspire our hope. However, no one but God can either know future events or reveal them. Fortune-tellers were attempting to pry information loose from God to which they were not entitled. But why would anyone need such knowledge? Cannot God be trusted to do what is best? Is the future or knowledge of it better off in a fortune-teller's hands than in God's? If my death is only a few days away, should knowing this cause me to panic and to begin for once to take God and religion seriously? Should I not prepare everyday all of my life to face death, whether it be tomorrow or in 50 years? If my death is in a few days, should I suddenly become generous and give my money to charity or should I selfishly spend most of it on a lavish world tour? Live everyday as if it belonged completely to God and was His gift to you and you will neither desire nor seek to know what your future holds. The future holds nothing but more days that totally belong to God and are His gift to you. What else do you need to know other than that?

The eventual outcome of the Church's objection to roulette and fortune-telling being part of a carnival, which, in the Middle Ages, was a religious feast, was that fortune-telling gave up their attempts to pry into God's future and instead turned to gambling, games of chance or luck. Now when we spin the roulette wheel we are not anxious as to what it will tell us about the future but how lucky the number we have chosen will be. The Roman goddess, Fortuna, who used to be the divine spinner of the wheel of life, was replaced by "Lady Luck" whose loyalty is very fickle: sometimes you win, mostly you lose!. If "Lady Luck" was less fickle than usual and stayed with you through a series of spins your fellow gamblers would enviously say that you were "Happy-go-lucky." And here is the origin of another important word, a favorite one today: "happiness". "Happy" began as an expression used in gambling. It meant almost what we mean by "lucky". A "happy person" had a good night at the roulette wheel. Their chosen number was stopped at time and time again at the end of each spin. An "unhappy person" was a continual loser and left the wheel either broke or in debt. Originally, happiness was a matter of sheer luck. You had lucky streaks and unlucky streaks, and there was little that you could do to insure that you would be a winner rather than a loser.

Obviously, if happiness were a matter of sheer luck, if it was here today and gone tomorrow, if there was nothing we could do to hold on to it and keep it, we would feel very uncomfortable and insecure. Happiness is very important to everyone. It is not something we wish to leave up to chance, luck, the spin of the wheel or the roll of the dice or the flip of a coin. If you're happy now you want to stay happy, and if you're unhappy now you want to know how to change things in order to be happy tomorrow. However, can happiness be made permanent and secure or will it always be a gamble? Traditionally, Christians have believed that happiness is both a gift and a task or something you must work to perfect. A Christian is someone whom God has chosen and because of God's choice he has received the gift of faith and now believes with great joy and thanksgiving that God has saved him or her from an ego-centric, "me-first" life. Christians do not call their salvation luck but grace, and there is nothing that makes a Christian happier than being saved from ego-centrism and "me-first", selfish living. If you believe in and are thankful for your salvation, you may include yourself among the world's happiest people. But once you've received this great gift and rejoice over Christ's sacrifice on your behalf, you've got to work everyday at fighting against self-centeredness and at trying to be more giving and helpful to other people. Happiness doesn't just happen like winning the lottery just happens. Happiness requires the discipline of self-restraint, of restraining your wants and appetites so that you have the time and resources to serve others. Happy people know how to put others first and themselves last, and being able to do that is what brings them happiness. Jesus said that the key to happiness (He preferred to use the word "blessedness" to happiness because blessedness implied that it was "God-given") was loving God absolutely and completely and your neighbor as if your neighbor were yourself. Anyone who has ever taken that commandment seriously and worked diligently to practice it has been blessed and happy. Of course, to love your neighbor as if he or she were yourself does not mean to give them more drugs than you give yourself or to buy them unnecessary and expensive gifts. Loving is not catering to a person's bad habits or spoiling them. Loving is doing what is best for a person and often doing what is best is what they don't like or appreciate. To pour an alcoholic's whiskey down the drain will not be liked or appreciated by your thirsty alcoholic neighbor but it might be what's best for him. Jesus did His best for us by carrying away our self-centeredness and egotism on His Cross.

Yet, the reason He was put on that cross is that no one liked or appreciated what He did. Jesus came to make us blessed or happy which can mean nothing other than that your own happiness is always to do what is right and best for others. How can a selfish, self-centered, me-first person ever be happy? Of course, selfish people often get a lot of pleasure out of life because pleasure, as opposed to blessedness, is to indulge, even over-indulge your appetites.

At this point we should make an important distinction, a distinction between feeling happy and being happy. Is such a distinction meaningful? Is it possible to be happy and not feel happy or to feel happy and not be happy. Let's look at an example. There are people who right now have cancer in an advanced stage in their bodies but because the cancer has not yet impaired the function of a vital organ they feel as healthy as always. Not until that cancer causes a vital organ to malfunction will they begin to feel pain or uncomfortable symptoms. If this feeling-great and healthy person went to a physician and had a thorough exam, that physician would have to say to his patient: "I know that you feel good but the test results show that you are very unhealthy. Cancer is throughout your body." Ironically, our hypothetical patient feels very healthy when, in fact, his condition or physical state is very unhealthy. Or take Jesus dying on the Cross. How happy did He feel with His body broken and wracked with pain? How happy did He feel that His closest followers had each one betrayed and deserted Him? How happy can a man feel who cries "My God, my God, why hast Thou forsaken me?" Surely Jesus had no happy feelings as He hung on the Cross, and yet who would deny that He was the happiest or most blessed man who has ever lived. Wouldn't you be happy if you knew that you had saved every human being from a Hell of self-centeredness and egotism? No, Jesus was in a happy or blessed condition even though his feelings were not happy and his pain made any pleasure impossible.

Therefore, it is a mistake to say that true happiness is "feeling happy" just as it would be a mistake to say that true health is "feeling healthy". Feelings are momentary and deceptive like moods. A person who is in a bad mood or feeling depressed is not a bad person or a chronic ingrate. Their mood and case of the "blues" may be gone in a few hours, they are smiling and cheerful. Some of the worst advice you will ever receive is what too often passes for good advice: "Get in touch with your feelings." What can that mean?

Can it mean that my feelings are a reliable indicator of whether I'm happy or not? If my feelings tell me that I don't like restraining my self-indulgence, should I keep in touch with that feeling? If Jesus had kept in touch with His feelings He would have remained a carpenter in Galilee, built up a profitable business, raised a family, done some travelling around the Roman Empire, attended a lot of feasts, and died in his own bed at the age of 90. That's what His feelings would have done for Him but those same feelings wouldn't have done anything for us. A "feeling happy Jesus" as opposed to a "being happy Jesus" would not be the Jesus Christ of the New Testament and our Lord and Savior. Jesus didn't quite say, "Don't stay in touch with your feelings." Instead, He said, "Deny yourself, take up your Cross, and follow me." That was Jesus' advice, not to those who wish for feelings of happiness, but to those who wished to be blessed, to be real human beings. Jesus would have agreed with Socrates who said: "Pigs wish to feel happy, human beings wish to be good."

Of course, we don't really know if pigs wish to feel happy but we can be almost sure that they don't want to be good unless we mean by good a "good" hot dog. Human beings, however, should wish to be good and to spend their lives striving for goodness. To be "good" means in the Bible to be on "good terms" with God. A good person makes God happy when that person is living the way God wants Him to live. And there is no greater joy or pleasure in this life than knowing that you have made God happy. We were created and born for happiness but that happiness means to wish and to strive to find our happiness in pleasing God. If you have little or no wish to please God, you cannot be happy even though you feel content and satisfied. Here again Jesus is our example. He lived only to please and make God happy which caused other people to criticize, reject, and avoid Him. Jesus' feelings were often hurt and He felt miserable. But because He knew that He was on the best of terms with God and that His kind of life pleased God He was in a state or condition of true and deep happiness or blessedness even when His feelings were hurt. Jesus' happiness can be our own but we should be warned that His kind of happiness puts being and doing good ahead of feeling good or experiencing feelings of intense, momentary pleasure. "Having lots of fun" is what many people tell us is essential to happiness. But what is "fun"? Again, originally fun meant "to make a fool out of someone" or to do something stupid. Such a meaning would seem to imply that if you

want to be one of those people who wish to feel happy, do something stupid and make a fool out of yourself. But if you wish to be happy and to be happy for always and forever, deny yourself, be good, love God and your neighbor with your whole self!