

Why Are We So Unhappy When We Have So Much?
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Almost weekly I deal with unhappy people. Some are unhappy in their marriages--their mates are "not fulfilling their needs." Others are upset with their children, their parents, or their bosses. Many are unhappy with themselves because of failure or problems they can't seem to overcome.

Why are we Americans so unhappy when we have so much? I don't mean to belittle the difficult and genuine problems people face. Anyone involved in helping people knows that there are some real horror stories out there.

But as a nation, we enjoy more of the factors that ought to go toward making life happy than any other nation in history: longer average lifespans, good medical care, plenty of food, extra clothing, nice homes, cars, and all the gadgets of American life. So why so many unhappy people?

Jesus gave us a radical answer when He said, "If anyone wishes to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross daily and follow Me. For whoever wishes to save his life shall lose it, but whoever loses his life for My sake, he is the one who will find it" (Luke 9:23, 24). Jesus is saying that the one who seeks self-fulfillment will come up empty, but the one who practices self-denial for Jesus' sake will find true happiness as a by-product.

This flies in the face of the modern "co-dependent, you-are-a-victim" approach that has flooded our society and, sadly, our churches. At the heart of this "self-help" movement is the theory that if you want to find happiness you'll have to stop catering to the needs of others and start looking out for yourself and your rights. Judging from the volume of book sales, millions are buying into this dead-end pursuit for happiness.

So, how would a person follow Jesus' radical prescription? At the heart of His words is an unpopular concept: Death to self! In Jesus' day, taking up one's cross didn't mean enduring a little irritation. The man who took up his cross was about to be killed!

The first way we have to die to self is to come to the cross of Jesus Christ as the only way we can be reconciled to God. Our proud human nature likes to think that we can earn heaven by our own good deeds. But the Bible is clear that we must turn from our proud efforts to save ourselves and accept the fact that Christ died for sinners, not for good people. I must die to self by admitting my sin to God and trusting in the solution He provided, the death of His Son Jesus. When I abandon trust in my own goodness and cry out, "God, be merciful to me the sinner," I am made right with God (see Luke 18:9-14).

Second, we need to understand that the Christian life not only begins with death to self, it continues the same way. Following Jesus means daily repudiating a self-centered life as we seek to love God and others (the two greatest commandments). I can't help but think that we Americans would be much more happy if we stopped seeking self-fulfillment and started following Jesus' radical prescription.

Someone once asked the famous psychiatrist, Dr. Karl Menninger, his advice for a person suffering from depression. Instead of saying, "Consult a psychiatrist," he surprised his audience by answering, "Lock up your house, go across the railway tracks, find someone in need and do something to help that person." That's the wisest advice I've ever heard a psychiatrist give!

This Thanksgiving, first die to self by humbly, thankfully receiving the forgiveness and eternal life God offers you through the cross of Jesus. Then, begin to follow Jesus in a life of self-denying service for others. As you do this, you'll delightfully find as a by-product the happiness you formerly sought through self-fulfillment.