

Habits of Happiness – 2b: Healthy Relationships

I'm going to read the same passage that I read last week – it's from Philippians chapter 1 – please do turn to this in your Bibles so you can follow it with me.

[Philippians 1: 1-11]

We're in a series called Habits of Happiness. It's about developing patterns of living and thinking and acting that, put simply, are just a better way to live, and as a result we will live happier lives! And we want that, because being happy is a good thing!

And as we saw last week, getting into the habits of right living and right thinking will produce a happiness that is lasting, whereas happiness that is based on circumstances and events is just short term. So if you want to be happy, your primary focus needs to be on changing the habits of how you live. Because our habits create our happiness. We shape our habits, and then they shape us.

To get some insights into this, we're working through Paul's letter to the Philippians, which although it's a fairly short book of the Bible, and although it was written by Paul when he was in prison, it's packed full of words like "joy", "glad", "enjoy", "rejoice", and "happiness".

We started the series off by looking at the habits of giving and generosity, and last week we began talking about healthy relationships, which is where Paul starts the letter. I suggested that there is a basic truth which we can see shown in our everyday lives: it is impossible to be happy while your relationships are unhappy. It's a key starting point – it's just a basic truth about how fundamentally important relationships are to the way we're designed.

And so in the first 11 verses of this letter, Paul describes his own relationship with the people in Philippi, and he reveals four habits – four relational habits that can be developed. They're easy to understand, but they're really hard to do! So if you want to transform your relationships, you need to practice and develop them as habits.

We talked about the first two habits last week. The first one was this: **"I will be grateful for the people in my life."** And we talked about how there is a well established link between gratitude and happiness. The more *grateful* you are, the *happier* you are. The more *ungrateful* you are, the *unhappier* you are. That's not rocket science.

And even though Paul actually had a really difficult time in Philippi, he's developed this attitude of gratitude to the extent that he can start off his letter in verse 3 by saying "Every time I think of you, I give thanks to God!"

Effectively he says "I'm grateful for who you are, and I'm grateful for what you've done." He's not pretending that their relationship is perfect, or that the Philippians are the best church on the planet; but he does choose to focus on the positive and let go of the negative.

The second habit we saw last week was **"I will pray with joy for the people in my life."**

We see several times in this letter that Paul prays for the believers in Philippi, and he prays for them with joy. Why does he do that? Because even though I'm quite sure there were lots of things he wanted to change about the Philippians, he knew that the best way to bring about that change was to *pray*! Just *wanting* people to change doesn't bring change! Thinking positive thoughts doesn't bring change. Nagging people doesn't bring change. But *God* can change people – so the best way to bring change in a relationship is to *pray*!

And Paul has a really helpful pattern of prayer he uses in verses 9-11. He says he prays this for the Philippians:

⁹And this is my prayer: that your love may abound more and more in knowledge and depth of insight, ¹⁰so that you may be able to discern what is best and may be pure and blameless for the day of Christ, ¹¹filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ – to the glory and praise of God. [NIV]

In other words, he prays these four things:

- 1 – He prays that they will grow in love.
- 2 – He prays that they will make wise choices.
- 3 – He prays that they will live with integrity. And finally,
- 4 – He prays that they will become like Jesus.

That's a great pattern of prayer to use for anyone in your life.

So that's where we've got to so far – now we're on to Paul's *third* habit of happiness in healthy relationships, which is this: **"I must expect the best from the people in my life."**

(repeat)

Here's what Paul says in verse 6: "I am *confident* of this, that God who *began* a good work in you will *carry it on* to completion until the day of Christ Jesus."

He expects the best from the people in his life.

Just like the first two habits, this is not something we do naturally! In fact we normally do just the opposite of this – we expect the worst! We expect people to let us down!

But the implication of what Paul is saying in verse 6 is this: you need to make a habit of *believing* in people – of expecting the *best* from them.

Now, even just on the level of human psychology there is a lot of validity in this. If you want to get the best out of people, *expect* the best from them! We'll come back to that in a second.

But I want us to see where Paul's starting point is for this idea. Let me read verse 6 again:

"I am *confident* of this, that God who *began* a good work in you will *carry it on* to completion until the day of Christ Jesus."

Who does Paul's confidence start with? [God!] As important as believing in people is, Paul's *starting* point isn't with people at all! It's with God! The Holy Spirit has started the work in us, and what the Holy Spirit starts, he carries through with.

So if Paul's confidence is based on God, why does he believe in the Philippians? Because they've got the Holy Spirit *working* in them!

Why should I believe in you, and expect the best from you? Most of all, because if you're a Christian you've got the Holy Spirit working in you!

That's Paul's starting point – that's one of the reasons why he's so good at bringing out the best in people. And he does three things to do that:

Number 1: Not only did he believe in people, he let people *know* that he believed in them. "I am confident..." he says. So, question, do you build up the people in your life, or do you tear them down? Do you show your confidence in them, and in what God is doing in them?

I was up at Kingsland a few weeks ago when they had their sports day – I'm sure you've all been to school sports days over the years. So imagine if you were a parent at one of those sports days, and your child was in a race and tripped and fell. Would you get up and say "Oh for goodness sake, you're pathetic, I'm so embarrassed – I'm leaving!"

No! Of course you wouldn't! Or at least I hope you wouldn't! I think you'd be on your feet yelling even louder: "You can do this! Keep going! Keep running, I believe in you!"

That's what *God* does with *you*, when you stumble.

And so that's what he wants you to do for other people. That's part of what it means to be like Jesus. Believe in people. That's interesting, isn't it – to be a Christian means believing in Jesus, sure, but it also means believing in other people. Because that's what Jesus does.

"I am confident that what God has *started* in you, he will continue to do."

There's something else interesting about this verse. There are two ideas here that we can see: one is Paul's belief in them and acceptance of them; and the other is the idea of *change*, that God is *changing* them and *transforming* them. Yes? Because although God has *started* a good work in them, he clearly hasn't finished it yet, because he's going to *continue* the work. That means change!

Now, here's my point. Acceptance, and transformation: which comes first? Does Paul say "I'm confident in you, I believe in you, because God has fully transformed you and you're now perfect?"

No! He says "I believe in you *now*! I accept you *now*! Even though God has got a lot more work to do in you still!"

And so when Paul talks to them, and writes to them, he doesn't tell it like it *is*. He tells it like it *could be*. Because he expects the best from them, and because he has faith in what God is going to do in their lives.

That doesn't mean that we *never* point out problems. But if you do that all the time, it just makes people defensive. We don't *change* people through *nagging*. We change people by building them up! We change people by drawing a picture of what they *could be*.

Do you want me to stand here and tell me what a bad job you're doing? Or do you want me to show you a vision of what you *could be* with God's power in your life? Which of those is more exciting?

And that's the second thing that Paul did: **he gave people vision**. And the vision was: you're going to *keep growing*. God is *still* at work in you! What God starts, he finishes! Paul gives people a vision for the future.

Now why is that important? Because study after study has shown that we tend to live up to the *expectations* of other people. When people expect the best of you, you tend to do better. That happens in school, it happens in the workplace, it happens in families, it happens in churches, and it happens in relationships. This has been shown again and again in studies: we tend to become what the most important people in our lives think about us.

So Paul gave people vision for what God was doing with them.

The third thing that Paul did was that **he was patient with people's progress**. We're still looking at verse 6 here – "I'm confident that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion".

But the *impact* of this point that is so important isn't so much on the people he's patient with, as it is on Paul himself. What I mean is this: if you insist on perfection in people, you're going to be frustrated and miserable for the rest of your life. Because nobody is perfect, and nobody is going to be perfect.

Especially you!

And if you're always wanting and expecting perfection in people *before you can enjoy them*, you're never going to be happy! Because it isn't going to happen! Whereas if you celebrate how far people have come, rather than just constantly complaining about how far they still have to go, I guarantee you'll be much happier in your relationship. And incidentally, so will they.

Let me give you an illustration of this. This is a picture that our daughter Gillian made at school when she was... significantly younger than she is now. But she brought it home, as you do, and Lindsey and I said "Fantastic!", or words to that effect, and stuck it for the next 6 months or so in a fairly prominent position on our fridge door. All of you who at some point in your past life have either had children or been children, plus had a fridge door, will be familiar with the concept here.



Now, why did Lindsey and I get so excited about this picture? Is it because Gillian had produced a Picasso or a Rembrandt that was technically and artistically perfect? No! It's because it was great for the stage that she was at in her life! And we wanted to celebrate that with her, and to encourage her to keep going!

So here's the thing. God doesn't wait until you're spiritually mature to start loving you. Thank goodness!

So that means *we* can't do that with *other* people either! We've got to love each other, warts and all!

But how do we do that? The key to it is love, and that's what Paul says in the next verse – look at this with me. This is verse 7.

"It is right for me to feel this way about all of you," [that is, to expect the best from you, to give thanks for you, to be confident about the work God is doing in you], **"since I have you in my heart".**

This is key to healthy relationships. You need to have people on your heart. Here's a great quote from Rick Warren – he says this: "What I've discovered, is that if people aren't on my heart, they're on my nerves! And if I want to get them off my nerves, I've got to get them on my heart!"

If you're praying for someone, they just don't annoy you, or irritate you as much. But if you're not praying for them, you get annoyed by them pretty easily!

Paul says "I have you in my heart."

And so this leads in to Paul's final habit. We've had:

"I will be grateful for the people in my life."

"I will pray with joy for the people in my life."

"I must expect the best from the people in my life."

and the last one is:

“I must love the people in my life like Jesus does.”

(repeat)

Remember what I said at the beginning *and* last week: these are easy to say, they’re easy to understand, and they’re *incredibly hard to do!* Because you’re *not* Jesus, and *I’m* not Jesus. And we tend to focus on ourselves, and our own needs, and our own lives.

But the need is for us to love people like Jesus does.

This is verse 8:

[“God knows how much I love you and long for you with the tender compassion of Christ Jesus.” \[NLT\]](#)

Is that hard? Yes, it’s really hard! But actually, there’s something really encouraging here too. Because the point of this is: we’re not doing this on our own! It’s not our very limited and inadequate love that we’re offering, and we’re not loving people in our own feeble strength. This is the love of *Christ*, and it’s him working through us, loving through us, using our weakness for his strength. Without that, this whole series just becomes a sort of glorified self-improvement programme.

You can buy any number of books on Amazon from psychologists or sociologists which will say a lot of the same things that we’ve been talking about for the last two weeks.

“Be grateful.”

“Expect the best from people.”

“Build people up.”

“Be patient with people.”

But the key difference for us, the missing factor in all those books that takes this to a completely different level, is that we’re not doing this on our own! Our love, our relationships, our habits, and our happiness, are all based on the work that Jesus is doing in us and through us.

And if you’ve been with us for all or part of this series so far because you were intrigued by the title “Habits of Happiness”, you need to know that above all else, happiness starts with a healthy relationship with Jesus Christ. That’s why we were born. That’s why we were brought into existence – to have a relationship with the living God, which we can do through his Son Jesus.

Let’s pray...