

THE KEY TO A HAPPY NEW YEAR

Listening to the Word of God

Text: Psalm 147:12-20; Jeremiah 31:7-14; John 1:1-18; Ephesians 1:3-14

Popular Keys to Happiness

"Have a Happy New Year!" Raise your hand if you've heard that said or said it yourself in the last few days. Wow. That's a lot of us! Now, leaving aside the debate over whether happiness really ought to be the thing we most energetically seek in this year ahead, let's just agree that happiness is a good thing. Let's assume that happiness is a grace we should all want more of for ourselves and others. The question then becomes, what's our strategy for increasing it? What will actually make us happier in this New Year?

Some of us will immediately respond that being given more MONEY would be a good start! I think of Joan Rivers' famous remark: "People may say that money is not the key to happiness, but I always figured that if you have enough money, you can have a key made!" A lot of people agree with that and maybe you're one of them. When surveyed, the average American says that they are certain they'd be happier if they had about twice as much money as they have now. Whether they're making \$25,000 or 25 million, the answer is the same: "I'd be happy if I had about twice as much."

Strangely, however, study after study confirms that once your basic needs are met, happiness does not increase, no matter how much more money you get. Google the phrase "economic materialism" and you'll be presented with scores of studies that have found that, save for the momentary adrenaline rush of a new purchase, with rare exceptions, persevering happiness actually seems to go down the more one's material count goes up.

So how about the other Happiness Key always being peddled to us? What about SEX? Will having more romance this year make you happier? Well, according to the research, that will work better than having more money! A Dartmouth College study found that an increase in the frequency of intimate relations is a much more dependable predictor of happiness than an increase of cash. On the happiness index, going from monthly to weekly is as good as being given a \$50,000 raise. So, you married folk, forget buying that new car. Just spend more time in the back seat of the one you've got!

The Better Key God Offers

But married, single, or young adult, there is something even more reliable you can do to make this New Year better than ever. "What's the key to happiness?"

asks Bernice Kanner, the late great journalist for Bloomberg News and New York magazine. The answer may surprise you. "According to a recent survey," she writes, the answer is "leading a moral life, attending church and reading the Bible." In short, if you want to be happier, "LISTEN TO GOD'S WORD."

Kanner goes on to share the results of research indicating that those who study the Scriptures regularly and seek to live by what they learn there report a higher level of satisfaction with life than those who don't read it. A study by the respected Barna Research Group found that 82% of regular Bible readers described themselves as "at peace" compared to just 58% of those who said they never read the Bible. 78% of regular Bible readers said they felt "happy" all or most of the time compared to 67 percent of nonreaders. 68% of regular Bible readers said they were "full of joy" compared to 44% who said they never read the Bible. A whopping 93% of all adults say that reading the Bible regularly makes them feel more thankful. Those are some pretty interesting stats, aren't they?

What God's Word Does

So why is listening to the Word of God such a crucial key to the well-being of people? Why do people who read the Bible regularly seem to experience a greater sense of peace, joy, and gratitude than those of us who do not? I think we get an answer to this question in our lectionary passage from John's Gospel today. Let me be clear before we look at it that this passage is talking first and foremost about Jesus, the Word of God made flesh (John 1:14). But because Christians believe (as Jesus taught) that the Bible is that same Word made written, the teachings we find in this text also tell us something about the effect we might expect the Bible to have in the lives of those who take it in.

The first thing this passage teaches us is suggested in the opening verse: "**In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God.**" In simplest terms: The closer you get to the Word, the closer you get to God.

Some people consider me reasonably close to God, and sometimes I believe I am. I've spent a lot of time looking for God. I've sought him out in nature. I have sought his face in hospital rooms and at graveyards. I've called out to him with great passion, particularly after badly striking a golf shot. But it has been when I have been reading the scriptures aloud in worship, or poring over them in my study, or searching their meaning with the guys in my small group that he seems to come closest to me. Sometimes it makes me roll in laughter or weep hot tears. I understand what those two disciples on the road to Emmaeus felt when they said: "**Were not our hearts burning within us while [Jesus] talked with us on the road and opened the Scriptures to us?**" (Luke 24:32).

Do you have that kind of intimacy with God? You can. Take some steps to get closer to his Word.

Secondly, John tells us in verse 3 that **"Through [the Word] all things were made; [and] without him nothing was made that has been made"** (John 1:3). I think the simple implication of that teaching is this: God's Word has the power to make big changes happen.

One day, the famous first century Rabbi Akiva was out shepherding his flocks when he noticed a tiny stream trickling down a hillside and dripping over a ledge on its journey toward the river below. Beneath the ledge was a massive boulder which, surprisingly, bore a deep impression precisely where the drip, drip, drip of water over the centuries had fallen. Rabbi Akiva observed: "If mere water can do this to hard rock, how much more can God's Word carve a way into my heart of flesh?" "Akiva realized that if the water had flowed over the rock all at once, the rock would have been unchanged. It was the slow but steady impact of each small droplet, year after year, that completely reformed the stone."

What significant changes has the Word of God brought about in your character and conduct through the years? Where do you need God to help make changes happen? If you can't point to some very deep impressions, some profound reshaping of your beliefs or your behaviors, then one of two things is certain: You're still young. Or, you need to put yourself more regularly beneath the drip, drip, drip of God's Word.

Here are the Big Ideas for today: The closer you get to the Word, the closer you get to God. God's Word has the power to make big changes happen. And, finally: The Word of God is light for living. The Apostle John put it this way: **"In [the Word] was life, and that life was the light of all mankind. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it"** (John 1:4-5).

Do you know that many Americans today are concerned about the darkness? In a recent survey, 77% of Americans expressed concern that morals and values are declining in our country. What is fascinating is what so many people are citing as the reason for this. The cause for the encroaching darkness most frequently named by those surveyed is a lack of regular Bible reading. Nearly 70% of Americans say they believe that the Bible provides answers on how to live a better life, but too few people are seeking those answers. Despite all the anti-Christian messaging we hear today, four times as many people believe that the Bible has too little influence in U.S. society today than those who feel it has too much influence.

Where do you need more light in your life? Is it in your marriage or parenting? Is it in dealing with temptation or managing your resources? Is it in coping with

illness and death? Where, if there was only more light, could life be happier and healthier in this New Year for you or for our society?

George Mueller, the great 19th Century Christian statesman once shared: "I never remember a period that I ever sincerely and patiently sought to know the will of God by the teaching of the Holy Ghost, through the instrumentality of the Word of God, but I have been always directed rightly. But if honesty of heart and uprightness before God were lacking, or if I did not patiently wait upon God for instruction, or if I preferred the counsel of my fellow men to the declarations of the Word of the living God, I made great mistakes."

Open the Box

The Bible says that, "**In the beginning was the Word**" (John 1:1). Let's begin this New Year by putting the Word first in our lives. How might you do that, you may wonder? Here are a few ideas: **1.** Each day read one chapter of the Old Testament and one chapter of the New. **2.** Commit yourself to reading the four Common Lectionary texts each week before you go to church on the weekend. **3.** Buy a devotional Bible and read it with others in your household at a mealtime. **4.** Get hold of any of the books in the Essentials Set and make the scripture texts there the focus of your personal or group study. **5.** Join a Bible study at your local church. **6.** Make use of the special resource we've printed up for you and posted with this sermon on the Christ Church website.

In her book *Amazing Grace*, Kathleen Norris shares what she terms "the scariest story" she's ever heard about the Bible, and with this I'll close. Norris was visiting a tough, self-sufficient named Arlo who had been diagnosed with terminal cancer. Arlo began reminiscing about his grandfather, a committed follower of Jesus, who – as a wedding present – had given Arlo and his bride an expensive leather Bible with their names embossed in gold on the cover. For months afterwards, Arlo's grandfather kept asking if he liked the Bible. "The wife had written a nice thank-you note," Arlo told Norris. "We'd thanked him in person, but somehow he couldn't let it lie, he always had to ask about it." And the truth was that Arlo had never bothered to even open the box. One day, Arlo finally did. "I finally took that Bible out of the closet and found that granddad had placed a twenty-dollar bill at the beginning of the Book of Genesis, and at the beginning of every book... over thirteen hundred dollars in all." Arlo's grandfather kept prompting him, because he feared his loved ones would never find the treasure he'd left for them.

Will you please LISTEN to these promptings too? God has left a treasure for you and me. It's more valuable than money. It's even better than sex. It's the key to a deeper happiness – to that healthier life each of us and our nation needs. It is time to get closer to God, to put ourselves under his stream, to seek out his light.

So, when, where, and how will YOU open the box?

PAGE 1

PAGE 1

© Daniel D. Meyer | Christ Church of Oak Brook

Debbie Kornmiller, "Key to Happiness," Arizona Daily Star, October 18, 2013
Sid Kirchheimer, "Sex Better Than Money for Happiness," WebMD, July 16, 2004
"Bible Reading Promotes Positive Outlook, Church Central, March 19, 2002

Lois Tverberg, Walking in the Dust of Rabbi Jesus (Zondervan, 2012)
The American Bible Society, State of the Bible in 2013
Basil Miller, George Mueller: Man of Faith and Miracles (Zondervan, 1941)
Kathleen Norris, Amazing Grace: A Vocabulary of Faith (Riverhead Books, 1998), p. 95