

# Q&A with Max Lucado

## Author of *How Happiness Happens*

### Q What's the state of happiness these days?

A Everyone craves happiness. And everyone benefits from it.

But fewer people are finding it. Only one-third of Americans surveyed said they were happy. In the nine-year history of the Harris Poll Survey of American Happiness, the highest index was 35 percent. This means a cloud of perpetual grayness overshadows two out of three people.<sup>i</sup> Smiles are in short supply. By some estimates clinical depression is ten times more rampant now than it was a century ago.<sup>ii</sup> The World Health Organization forecasts that by the year 2020 “depression will become the second leading cause of disease worldwide.”<sup>iii</sup>

So how does happiness happen? The words of Jesus are spot-on: “It is more blessed to give than to receive” (Acts 22:35). Because when you do, it has a boomerang effect. Happiness happens when we give it away.

This is such great news. You can't control your genetics. You aren't in charge of the weather, the traffic, or the occupant of the White House. But you can always increase the number of smiles on our planet. You can lighten the load and brighten the day of other human beings. And don't be surprised when you begin to sense a newfound joy yourself.

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### Q Is God really interested in our happiness?

A Scripture has more than twenty-seven hundred passages that contain words like *joy, happiness, gladness, merriment, pleasure, celebration, cheer, laughter, delight, jubilation, feasting, blessing, and exultation*.<sup>iv</sup> Our joy level matters to God.

This is no call to naiveté or superficial happy talk. Jesus spoke candidly about sin, death, and the needs of the human heart. Yet he did so with hope. He brought joy to the people of first-century Palestine. And he wants to bring joy to the people of this generation, and he has enlisted some special agents of happiness to do the job. You and me.

Not an easy task. The people in our world can be moody, fickle, and stubborn. And that just describes my wife's husband. If we are going to find the joy that comes through giving joy away, we need a plan. We need instruction. No wonder the Bible has so much to say about finding joy in the act of sharing it. The New Testament contains more than fifty “one another” statements, practical principles for making happiness happen. I've condensed them into a list of ten.

1. Encourage one another (1 Thess. 5:11).
2. Bear with one another (Eph. 4:2).
3. Regard one another as more important (Phil. 2:4).
4. Greet one another (Rom. 16:16).
5. Pray for one another (James 5:16).

6. Serve one another (Gal. 5:13).
7. Accept one another (Rom. 15:7).
8. Admonish one another (Col. 3:16).
9. Forgive one another (Eph. 4:32).
10. Love one another (1 John 3:11).

If we open the door to each of these “one another” passages and embark on a happiness project, we may discover what the Bible teaches and research affirms: doing good does good for the doer.

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### Q How does patience build happiness?

A The apostle Paul said, “Be patient, bearing with one another in love” (Eph. 4:2 NIV).

The patient person sees all the peculiarities of the world. But rather than react, he bears with them. There are many times when we enjoy one another, delight in one another, and even relish one another. Yet there are occasions when it takes a Herculean act of forbearance just to put up with one another. Paul’s verb means exactly that: to tolerate, endure, and forbear

Denalyn’s thirty-seven years of marriage to me, the king of quirks, qualifies her for a PhD in this subject.

When I drive, my mind tends to wander. When it does, the car slows to a crawl. (“Max, pay attention.”)

I repair things at risk of ruining them. (“Max, I told you I could call a handyman.”)

I change bedrooms in the middle of the night. I have no explanation or justification. I just wake up in need of new pastures. (“Max, where did you end up last night?”)

My jaw makes a popping noise when I eat steak. (“Max, you’re distracting the people at the next table.”)

I’m good for thirty minutes at a party. She’s good for two hours. (“Max, we just got here.”)

Sending me to the grocery store is like sending me to the Amazon. I may never emerge. (“You’ve been gone for two hours, and you only bought potato chips?”)

Yet Denalyn is the happiest person within a dozen zip codes. Ask her friends or ask my daughters. They will tell you she’s married to an odd duck, but she has the joy level of a kid at a carnival. Here is her secret: She’s learned to enjoy my idiosyncrasies. She thinks I’m entertaining. Who would’ve thought? In her eyes I’m a candidate for an oddball Oscar.

To be clear, she lets her opinions be heard. I know when I’ve tested her patience. Yet I never fear failing the test and am happier for it.

Happiness is less an emotion and more a decision, a decision to bear with one another.

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### Q Does social media sap our happiness?

A Our generation’s fascination with social media has taken addiction to adulation to a whole new level. We measure success in “likes,” “retweets,” “thumbs-up,” and “friends.” Self-images rise and fall upon the whim of clicks and Facebook entries. Social media is social comparison on steroids! Does it make sense to hinge your

joy on the unpredictable reactions and reviews of people you may not even know?

Jesus surely had a smile on his face when he gave following instructions:

When someone invites you to dinner, don't take the place of honor. Somebody more important than you might have been invited by the host. Then he'll come and call out in front of everybody, "You're in the wrong place. The place of honor belongs to this man." Red-faced, you'll have to make your way to the very last table, the only place left.

When you're invited to dinner, go and sit at the last place. Then when the host comes he may very well say, "Friend, come up to the front." That will give the dinner guests something to talk about! (Luke 14:8-10 THE MESSAGE)

Happy are the unentitled! Expecting the applause of others is a fool's enterprise! Do yourself a favor and assume nothing. If you go unnoticed, you won't be surprised. If you are noticed, you can celebrate.

Here is a helpful exercise that can turn your focus off yourself and on to others. During the next twenty-four hours make it your aim to celebrate everything good that happens to someone else. Keep a list. Develop your "rejoice with those who rejoice" (Rom. 12:15 NIV) muscle. The instant you see something good done by or for another person, let out a whoop and a holler, silently if not publicly. Throw some confetti. Can you envision the fun you will have?

By the end of the day, I daresay, you will be whistling your way through life.

Make a big deal out of yourself, and brace yourself for a day of disappointments. Make a big deal out of others, and expect a blue-ribbon day. You will move from joy to joy as you regard other people's success as more important than your own.

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### **Q** You write about the "fine art of saying hello." Can a greeting spread happiness?

**A** The ungreeted individual never thinks, *They ignored me because they love me*. Just the opposite. Insecurity is often the unhappy child of silence. (Anyone who has lingered unnoticed and unaddressed at a party knows this sense of loneliness.)

Last evening Denalyn and I joined three other couples for dinner at one of their homes. We've been friends for decades. We've traveled, played, and raised our families together.

As we were dining, the eldest son of the host family stopped by. He's been through a tough stretch, battling depression, struggling through a divorce. We rose to greet him when he entered the room, not because of his recent turmoil, but, well, because he is a dear friend to all of us.

We chatted and laughed at some stories. He told us about the girls who think it's funny that a bachelor has two cats. It was nice, very enjoyable. But memorable? No. At least not to me. Later that evening he sent this text to his mom:

Thank you again for tonight.... I've never felt so much love walking into a room before.... It was kinda crazy.... It felt spiritual.... I just had this feeling like I was being greeted in heaven or something. That was

really powerful.... It's like I was instantly surrounded by all this unconditional love, and it just brought me a peace like I never felt before. I think that will stay with me forever.

We just never know, do we? We never know when a gesture of kindness will touch a heart. Perhaps that's why Paul urged us to greet *everyone*. He did not say, "Greet the people you like." Or "Greet the people you know." Or "Greet the people you want to know." He said simply, "Greet one another."

### Q How does acceptance lead to happiness?

A Raleigh Washington is an African American minister who has dedicated much of his life to racial reconciliation. He says that the most important statement in bridge building is this: "Help me understand what it's like to be you."<sup>v</sup>

Help me understand what it's like to be a teenager in this day and age.

Help me understand what it's like to be born into affluence.

Help me understand the challenges you face as an immigrant.

Help me understand what it's like to be a female in a gray flannel corporation.

Then sit back and listen. Really listen. Listening is a healing balm for raw emotions. (A friend admitted to me, "I often appear to be listening when actually I am reloading.")

"Be in agreement [be like-minded; live in harmony], understanding each other [sympathetic], loving each other as family [showing brotherly love], being kind [tender; compassionate] and humble" (1 Peter 3:8 EXB).

Abraham Lincoln modeled this type of acceptance. During the Civil War when his wife criticized people from the South, he told her, "Don't criticize them, Mary; they are just what we would be under similar circumstances."<sup>vi</sup>

We are never ever called to redeem the world. "Savior of humanity" is not on your job description or mine. Encourage, correct, applaud, and admonish? By all means. But save the world? In no way. There is only one Messiah and one throne. He isn't you, and the throne isn't yours.

Happiness happens, not by fixing people, but by accepting people and entrusting them into the care of God. Jesus did this. Otherwise, how could he have endured? No one knew humankind's hypocrisy and failings more than he. Christ knew exactly what people needed, yet he gave them time and space to grow. Aren't we wise to do likewise?



<sup>i</sup> Alexandra Sifferlin, "Here's How Happy Americans Are Right Now," *Time*, July 26, 2017, <http://time.com/4871720/how-happy-are-americans/>.

<sup>ii</sup> Lyubomirsky, *The How of Happiness*, 37.

Pamela Cowan, "Depression Will Be the Second Leading Cause of Disease by 2020: WHO," *Calgary Herald*, October 7, 2010, <http://www.calgaryherald.com/health/Depression+will+second+leading+cause+disease+2020/3640325/story.html>.

<sup>iv</sup> Randy Alcorn, *Happiness* (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale, 2015), 19.

<sup>v</sup> Told to me in person and used by permission.

<sup>vi</sup> Alan Loy McGinnis, *The Friendship Factor: How to Get Closer to the People You Care For* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1979), 70.