

Happiness according to the Timothy Keller book, Making Sense of God

This book thinks of the believer and the unbeliever who has doubts about the claims Christianity makes for God. It seeks to argue that faith in God is the best way to become moral and it satisfies the needs of the human heart. It gives evidence for God but purports to give evidence why faith in God is a beneficial thing.

Keller refers to Jonathan Haidt who says that the problem with seeking happiness from success is that the happiness fades away too fast and then you are left feeling "more empty than if you had never tasted the joy."

This is cynical. You are left feeling empty and deflated but it is not true you are still better off never having tasted the joy. Haidt is assuming the emptiness is worse after getting what you want and getting let down by it. That is only true of some not all. It is not necessarily correct.

However, religious people who find bliss in God do report what Haidt says but God is not the same as anything else. It may be unique to it.

It is not fair to pretend that success just means things such as wealth, family and friends or whatever as Keller does. If you feel peace and joy in the midst of failure that is simply just another form of success!

Keller warns that if you think happiness is just an inner matter, that is wrong for "modern research shows some external circumstances do correlate with increased satisfaction".

Making happiness about the inside and never the out leads to this: "Rather than change the world as it is, we were to resign ourselves to it." Keller warns against "finding contentment through detachment." He states, "That not only brings about a selfishness and a hardness but also weakens our love relationships, thus undermining the greatest source of joy we know. We need not only to receive love but also to give it."

Keller then observes that the more successful society is with material things and benefits that the less happy it gets. He sums it up as "the disappointment of success." The problem is that, "We are unhappy even in success because we seek happiness from success."

He quotes the Stoic Epictetus as giving the solution, "Do not seek to have events happen as you want them to, but instead want them to happen as they do happen, and your life will go well." However he says that "some external circumstances do correlate with increased satisfaction." So it seems you have to find the happy medium between seeking happiness from success and by changing your attitude. That way you can change yourself and also try to change the world a little bit. It is better than being resigned completely to whatever happens. If all our craving or money or beauty or whatever is mistakingly crave for love as a crave for these things we will end up frustrated and angry and unhappy.

There is no mention of how people who see their success as a gift from God still end up unhappy! Not all who are greedy and crave success are really unhappy.

Keller says that happiness is found in deciding that you will do all for the will of God alone and not your own will. But that is another way of seeking happiness in and from success. Your submission to the all-good perfect God is a bigger inner success than submitting to the banks to get millions. If one is arrogant so is the other.

It will be more damaging, fatally damaging, if you are convinced the creator of the universe is the way to avoid the time wasting of seeking contentment and happiness from success and find nothing but misery. If it does not work, then that will be worse than how seeking happiness in some transient thing such as wealth will damage you. A permanent and eternal failure to give you happiness has to be unimaginably worse than depending on, say, sex or money, to fill a void. You sort of know they cannot last or do it well anyway even as you try to keep searching for happiness in them. But to have a source of indestructible and eternal happiness that can't or won't deliver is worse than any fat bank account making you miserable for at least it won't last!

Keller approves of Alain de Botton saying that looking for things such as status and wealth for example is just another way of looking for love - you want to find and keep relationships through them. This makes sense in the light of Haidt's assertion that material things and the circumstances of your life partly help you be happy even if they are not enough on their own.

So it is not badness or anything that is behind the problems of life, it is love as in, not loving the right things the right way.

Keller writes that the notion that most people are basically happy belittles happiness and makes it trivial. I would suggest you can say the same thing if you say people are basically good or have a sense of God that we can learn from.

Saying we are all basically selfish in terms of how we prefer ourselves to God makes that trivial too!!

The only answer is that everybody is an individual.

What is worse.

"Saying all people are good shows you don't take good seriously".

"Saying all people are okay shows you don't take okay seriously".

"Saying all people are ungodly (not saying evil) shows you don't take ungodliness seriously".

"Saying all people are evil shows you don't take evil seriously".

The ones that call all bad to God or others are the worst for you need to identify evil so you can distance from it. Then you can build on that to be good. That is how it works.

We live in a world of utilitarians, those who put the most happiness of the most people first. Our utilitarians really mean "me and my family and friends" by most people.

Most people are utilitarians even if they do not realise it. This is more important to humanity than God. Keller will struggle with making God truly inspiring and relevant.

It is clear that God and worship are really covers for utilitarianism.

Anyway he tries to tell us we need to find happiness in God.

Keller points out how Ronald Dworkin dealt with how morality is about having the responsibility to live right. The question is who are you responsible to? Yourself? Others? God? Or all three? He says you are not responsible to yourself. If you were you would be able to free yourself from the obligation to do good. You cannot. To answer that it is God is to say morality in its true form is all about relationship.

Having nobody to relate to does not mean you cannot clean out your heart. An honest man on a desert island remains honest. There is no proof that anybody really needs a relationship with God.

Dworkin is wrong. It cannot be possible to free yourself from the duty to be good for that is saying you have a duty to free yourself if you want to. But morality is not about what you want. It is not true that being responsible to yourself implies a right to drop morality. It is like looking at a painting and telling your eyes not to see it.

As Keller tells us in the book, Dworkin said that those who believe there is no God still believe that purpose and value are true and real. This to them is just another form of belief or faith for they cannot prove that purpose and value are real no matter what anybody thinks.

Keller writes, "Dworkin startled many people - by saying that belief in humanistic values was an act of religious faith" - which he defined as "something beyond nature" and something "which cannot be grasped even by finally understanding the most fundamental of physical laws."

How religious is that really? People have felt that morality is bigger than God and that it is a standard that even God has to fall down before in obedience. Faith in God has not stopped them feeling there is something beyond nature and everything even God that is binding.

Dworkin then knows that there is nothing in nature that explains our moral sense? Does he know all about nature?

Keller writes that St Augustine is right to deny that our problems are stemming only from a lack of love. Augustine said our loves are disordered for "we often love less important things more and the more important things less. Therefore, the unhappiness and disorder of our lives are caused by the disorder of our loves".

So love is not good itself. It must be sane and temperate. You can be praised and hailed for your love when it is actually disordered.

Making Sense of God says that Jesus shows us God and Jesus made sacrifices for us and adds "Only if you see him doing

this all for you – does that begin to change your heart. He suffered and died for your sake. Now out of joy we can love him just for his sake, just for the beauty of who he is and what he has done. You can't force your heart to love. A kind of vague god, a god of love, an abstract god will never change your heart.”

We are not told how we are so used to words such as God that we do not realise how unclear God is. We do not really know how God can relate to happiness and love when God is vague. The mess over understanding justice and love clearly shows that if God represents these things then God is unclear. He is unclear anyway but the values are too grey and that makes it worse.

The Christian heart then is not really changed. Happiness is just used as a tool for furthering Christian ideological suppositions.