

This past week I was reading the newspaper and saw an article about David Letterman visiting a therapist. Wouldn't it be terrible to be so famous that it got written about if you went to see a therapist? Just imagine that. You've been struggling with depression and finally work up the courage to talk about it with a therapist and it gets written about in the newspaper and everyone knows. No matter where you go, total strangers come up to you and ask, "How's that therapy going?" Or "Is it your marriage? How are things going there, Dave? Can I call you Dave?"

When we lived in Indianapolis, I went to see a therapist. I'd never been to a therapist so didn't tell anyone, not even Joan. When I left the house, Joan asked where I was going and I told her to see my girlfriend. I walked in the therapist's waiting room and the biggest blabbermouth in our church was sitting there. And I couldn't even make a deal with her. It wasn't like two Baptists seeing one another in a bar agreeing not to tell on each other. This lady stood up nearly every Sunday and talked about seeing her therapist. Even her mailman knew she had a therapist. She practically lived at her therapist's. But I'd never been to one so felt awkward about it, then walked in, and there was Miss Blabbermouth. That was how David Letterman must have felt.

So Dave Letterman went to a therapist because of depression. And because, and I'm not making this up, because of his relationship with Oprah Winfrey. Now I don't read the tabloids, but J.B. Symons does, and he'd told me that apparently David Letterman and Oprah Winfrey had had a running feud and that David had said some unkind things about Oprah, and not just Oprah, but he had been treating other people unkindly, too. His parents hadn't raised him to be unkind, and he began to feel guilty and depressed for not living up to his highest ideals. He'd always thought of himself as a kind person, didn't like who he had become, so went to talk with a therapist. And I think that's admirable, and I'm glad J.B. was able to give me the background on it.

We've been talking about happiness. Let's do a quick review of the things that make for happiness. We should know them by heart now. Happy people know the importance of goals, of waking up each morning with a good and noble purpose in mind. Happy people know the importance of a proper attitude, they know that most folks are as happy as they make their minds up to be. Happy people nurture and cultivate healthy and positive relationships. Last week, we said that those who have happiness as their primary goal in life will seldom attain it. For in their haste to be happy, in their desire to be happy now, they will look for the shortcut to happiness, and no such shortcut exists.

This morning, I would like for us to think about this: Happy people live up to their highest ideals. They know the difference between right and wrong, they know what enriches life and what degrades it, and they commit themselves to doing the right and good thing. They live up to their highest ideals. And when they don't, they become discouraged, and even depressed, and usually remain that way until their behavior corresponds with their highest ideals.

Remember the story of Judas, the disciple of Jesus. The gospel accounts treat him with contempt, but Jesus obviously saw something in him. So let us regard Judas as a virtuous man, a man of high ideals, who in a crucial moment failed to live up to them. Unable to live up to his highest ideals, he was unable to live with himself, and took his life. It is not our place to judge him, for each of us know the bitter taste of self-contempt, when we have failed to honor and achieve our highest principles.

Happy people develop the habit of asking themselves, "Is what I am about to do consistent with my highest values?" In crucial moments, they stop and ask themselves, "Of all the possible directions I can take at this moment, which directions is truest to my noblest principles." Because they know that even if their venture meets with failure, they will have at least retained their dignity and self-respect.

I remember when I approached my first publisher about a book I was writing. They didn't like the theology and told me if I had it published they would fire me. So I had to make a decision, and I decided that publishing the book was very important, even if it caused me to be fired and lose a gazillion dollars. I published the book, got fired, lost a gazillion dollars, and instead of being depressed, I felt wonderfully liberated, because I knew I had remained faithful to my highest ideals. To be honest, I didn't immediately feel wonderfully liberated. At first, I thought I was an idiot and I was worried. But before long I felt a deep sense of contentment. Forgive me for bragging on myself, but I've been brave and virtuous so few times I like reminding people of them.

Happy people live up to their highest ideals. They know what kind of person they want to be, and their decisions and actions reflect it.

A few years ago, we had a visitor here at Fairfield, a Quaker from North Carolina, who while in college had marched with Martin Luther King, Jr. in Selma, Alabama. When the police arrested the marchers, this white Quaker man got put in the same jail cell with Martin Luther King, Jr. and two other African-American men. Doctor King and the other two men decided they were going on a hunger strike, but this Quaker was still a growing boy in need of nourishment, so he decided not to fast and Doctor King gave him his sandwich.

Can you imagine that, getting to eat Martin Luther King, Jr.'s sandwich? Wouldn't that be a story for your grandchildren! I asked him what that sandwich tasted like. "Best sandwich I ever ate," he said. I think I would have taken that sandwich home and put it in my scrap book.

I asked him what it was like to be in a jail cell with Martin Luther King, Jr. and he said it was one of the most wonderful things that had ever happened to him. Said they stayed up most of the night talking.

It was in 1965. The year before Doctor King had been awarded the Nobel Peace Prize. He said, "How many times do you end up in jail with a Nobel Peace Prize winner? You don't waste your time sleeping."

Now you put me in a jail cell and I will fret and worry and feel sorry for myself. Heck, I get depressed just visiting people in jail. I get depressed driving by jails. They just drip with misery. But he said Dr. King had this lightness, this joy, about him the whole time they were in this filthy dirty cell.

You know what that joy was, don't you? It was the happiness of a man living up to his highest ideals.

If you want to be happy, you decide for yourself what is the noblest, the most loving, the most virtuous way to live, and you stick to it, and you will discover depths of joy you did not think possible. Happy people live up to their highest ideals.