

Against the Current

A column for teens and young adults

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Wait. . . wait. . . not yet. . .

In today's world there are two things that all of us can pretty well be sure of: a) everyone wants to be happy; b) we live in a culture of instant gratification.

The problem is that these two things generally don't go together.

Though we live in a society that enjoys one of the highest standards of living in the history of mankind, we all know people – often people who have more than they need financially or materially – who are unhappy.

Where's the problem? What's the secret of happiness that they're missing?

Happiness is a difficult thing to define. On the passive side it usually involves being respected, appreciated, and loved; feelings of self-worth, satisfaction, and contentment; and being able to enjoy "the good things of life". From the active perspective it usually results from good, hard work; from using the talents God gave us for the benefit of ourselves and others; in being creative, artistic, and physically active; and from helping, serving, and loving others.

It's been said that "Pleasure is a good time, but happiness is a good life". "Being happy" doesn't mean that we won't experience sadness, disappointment, pain, sorrow, or suffering. It means that we'll be able to deal with them, accept them, see them for what they are, and not be crushed by them. It means that, on the whole, we'll love life, and be grateful for everything we do, have, and experience. And pleasure isn't bad. Part of happiness is enjoying our pleasures in the proper context, in the appropriate way, and to the right degree.

Various aspects of human life and psychology which were understood over a millennium ago by Christian saints have been "discovered" by psychologists and sociologists over the past two centuries. An example of this can be found in scientific research regarding delayed gratification.

Several decades ago an experiment was begun to study the effect of delayed gratification on a person's life and happiness. Delayed gratification simply means that a person who is looking forward to a certain pleasure (eating, relaxing, watching a movie, whatever) is able to postpone the pleasurable activity in order to do something which is more necessary, beneficial, or important.

The scientists began the study with young children, and followed them through till adulthood. One of the tests they did was to put the child in a room by themselves, put a piece of candy on the table, and tell the child they were going out, but would be back soon - not saying, however, how long they would be gone for. They told the child that they could eat the candy if they wished, but if, when they returned, the child had not eaten the candy they'd get another piece of candy as well. In other words, if the child could delay their gratification - not eat the candy now - they'd get more candy later.

Through this, and other experiments that were done in the course of the study, it became apparent that those who were able to delay their gratification did better in school, socially, and were, on the whole, happier.

We experience the truth of this reality in all aspects of our life: I want to watch TV, but I should do my schoolwork; I want to eat the pizza, but have soccer practice; I want a new iPhone, but should save the money to pay for my university tuition.

Not long ago thriftiness (not spending money unless one actually needed something) was regarded as a virtue. Nowadays it's easy to get the idea that spending money needlessly is the virtuous thing to do. "Buy more", we are told, "It will help the economy!" The main goal of the advertising industry is to get us to spend money that we don't have on things that we don't need.

Time, though, is even more valuable than money (the government can print more money, but you can't print more time!). Personal peace, contentment, safety, and happiness are probably the most valuable things of all. Being able to delay gratification, to postpone the enjoyment of one pleasure for the sake of a greater pleasure or a greater reward in the future, is one of the keys to economic, social, and personal happiness.

This truth is woven into the fabric of reality, whether at work (putting money into a pension), at school (studying for a test), in sports (hours of practice to compete successfully), in marriage (statistically there is more abuse and less happiness in relationships where unmarried people just “live together”), in everything.

Delayed gratification is no less important in our Christian life. In one sense the entire Christian life is nothing more than an example of delayed gratification – after all, we believe the goal of our life is eternal happiness with God, and so everything we do in this biological life is geared towards making this goal a reality. We pray, fast, help the poor, worship, confess our sins, receive communion, read the Bible, follow Christian moral teachings, etc., and in doing these things we take time, money, and energy that we might use to satisfy our own personal desires and use them instead for the sake of Christ, personal growth here on earth, and eternal happiness in the age to come.

The Great Fast is a great lesson in delayed gratification. As Orthodox Christians we prepare for the feast of the Resurrection of our Lord not by partying, drinking, or engaging in an orgy of consumerism, but by praying, fasting, helping the poor, etc. It’s a great time to consider for ourselves how controlling our personal wishes, desires and wants can help us develop as human beings and as Christians. Generally speaking, the more we’re able to delay gratification in our own lives the happier we’ll be – both here on earth, and in the life to come as well.