

P.S.

Happiness = \$40,000

MOST PEOPLE in Western society would aspire to be wealthy; we would like to be paid more money than we currently earn. Being brought up in a capitalist economy and subjected to its education and its media, it is hard for me to imagine thinking any other way. Riches make you happy, right? It would seem a logical enough supposition, given the emphasis modern society places upon wealth and the status symbols that demonstrate it.

Wrong. A major study was carried out recently to examine the correlation between income and happiness. It was found that, as income increased from some kind of minimum level to around \$40,000, so, by and large, did happiness. But beyond that magic number happiness began to recede again. As people get richer (beyond a certain level at least), they are more likely to become unhappy!

This is the part that the world forgot to tell us. \$40,000 is a fine but not massive salary. Putting it into UK terms and adjusting the currency for purchasing power, we might be talking of a salary around the £30,000 mark; somewhat above the national average, but not strikingly so, and certainly below the median household income. Beyond this point of abundance or sufficiency (isn't it funny how we will each look at that figure so differently, depending on our own income!) it seems that the increasing of means serves only to increase discontent. Perhaps material things become too dominant in one's thinking, too much an end in themselves. Perhaps it is the range of choice unlocked by greater income that is too much for human nature to cope with.

Yet the Bible knew this all along: "For the love of money is the root of all evil: which while some coveted after, they have erred from the faith, and pierced themselves through [hardly a pleasant choice of verb] with many sorrows". So Paul wrote to Timothy (1 Tim. 6:10). But it is in the Old Testament that the point is made more elaborately. When goods are increased, commented the Preacher wryly, so are they increased that eat them (Eccl. 5:11)—an observation which applies not only to hospitality and the keeping of household servants but also to the fuel consumption of one's car and the size of one's council tax bill.

More expansively, Agur put it like this:

"Two things have I required of Thee; deny me them not before I die: remove far from me vanity and lies: give me neither poverty nor riches; feed me with food convenient for me: lest I be full, and deny Thee, and say, Who is the LORD? or lest I be poor, and steal, and take the name of my God in vain" (Prov. 30:7-9).

The comparison with the rising and falling of happiness around that \$40,000 level is strong. It is better to be content. Ultimately, it is better to have the Lord than to be wealthy. The Kingdom is the pearl of great price. Happiness and contentment are of greater value than a fat salary.

It's quite interesting that even governments seem at last to be beginning to realise this point. How does one measure the output (and therefore, in some relative sense, the success) of one's country? One of the most widely used ways has been to look at GDP (gross domestic product), GNP (gross national product), and GDP per capita (per head). This is rational enough, and these touchstone concepts of economics will no doubt remain central to the kingdoms of men.

But governments (and the psychologists and sociologists who advise them) are increasingly realising that one must go beyond these traditional measures to measure truly the output of a country. There are other things that are worth producing beyond money, in other words. There are other measures of health and success besides the US dollar. Societies are finally beginning to realise that they need to start concentrating on and measuring some of these. Quite what a 'happiness quotient' might look like to our world is something which is still being finalised, but the search is certainly on.

In this matter, too, the Bible has decisively led the way. True happiness—and happiness of a spiritual kind—does not derive from wealth at all. Not only does the Bible testify to the emptiness of the pursuit of riches, it also exposes the futility of the entire human condition without God. It is a relationship with God and with His Son which enables life to take on its full richness of colour, purpose and fulfilment. The world looks for happiness and meaning, yet paradoxically knows neither what form it should take nor where it might be found. It is a blessing indeed that God has chosen to reveal both.

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