

Willow River Parish: Clear Lake, Deer Park, and Faith Family

Title: What Truly Makes Us Happy?

Lesson: John 13:31-35

³¹ When he was gone, Jesus said, "Now the Son of Man is glorified and God is glorified in him. ³² If God is glorified in him,¹⁰ God will glorify the Son in himself, and will glorify him at once.

³³ "My children, I will be with you only a little longer. You will look for me, and just as I told the Jews, so I tell you now: Where I am going, you cannot come.

³⁴ "A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. ³⁵ By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another."

When I was a child, I was incredibly curious. I was especially fascinated by the universe. I don't quite remember if it was in first or second grade, but I clearly recall the moment I saw a book about space on the classroom bookshelf. From that moment, I was hooked, always wondering about the cosmos. Back then, my questions were things like: *Are there aliens out there? Is there another planet where humans could live?*

During science class, we studied physics, chemistry, and biology, but my favorite was always astronomy. When that time came, I'd flood my teacher with questions about the universe. Sometimes, I asked so many questions that the teacher would ask me to stop so we could move on with the lesson! My son is also very curious and full of questions, and I often see myself in him.

My fascination with space continued, and it grew even stronger when I was in seventh grade. That's when I watched the movie *Contact*, featuring Jodie Foster, who played an astronomer searching for extraterrestrial intelligence. That movie captivated me. Around that time, I saved up my pocket money to buy a small pair of binoculars. At night, I'd observe the moon, and sometimes I'd catch a glimpse of Venus, shining like a bright dot in the sky. I even bought and read *Cosmos* by Carl Sagan, a famous astronomer.

It was probably around then that I started telling my friends my dream was to become an astronomer. That dream stayed with me until my junior year of

high school. I had a one-on-one conversation with my earth science teacher, who asked me what I wanted to be and what I wanted to study in college. I told him I wanted to be an astronomer searching for extraterrestrial life. But he just smiled quietly, as if he thought my dream was far-fetched. If he had taken my dream seriously and encouraged me, I might not be standing here today.

That day, though, became a turning point for me. It led me to think more deeply and seriously about my future and my dreams. I sat down and asked myself: *Why do I want to be an astronomer? Why do I want to search for extraterrestrial life? Why do I want to find a second Earth where humans could live?* But beyond satisfying my curiosity and fascination, I couldn't come up with any meaningful answers.

Those questions expanded into bigger ones about the meaning of life, and I began to wrestle with them earnestly. As some of you may know, my father is a pastor in the Korean Methodist Church. My mother, though not ordained, studied Methodist theology in seminary. So, for me, attending church every Sunday was as natural as breathing. But like most teenagers going through adolescence, I experienced an inner conflict between the values taught at church and the values the world seemed to pursue.

I'm sure many of you have asked questions like these at least once: *Why do I have to go to church? Why do I need to pray? Why should I believe in God? Is God really alive?* Especially back then, I was passionate about science, thought of myself as smart and rational, and the values taught at church didn't always feel compelling to me.

But then, by chance, I attended a Christian youth camp. During a time of worship and prayer, I had a powerful encounter with the Holy Spirit for the first time. I don't know how to explain it. But I realized that God is truly alive, and many of my doubts about church faded away. That experience didn't instantly make me decide to become a pastor, but it shifted the driving force of my life. Before, my life had been guided by curiosity and fascination. After that moment, it became about living a life that pleases God.

From then on, I began to think about how I could live in a way that honors God. My interest in the universe shifted to the Earth that God created, and I explored fields like environmental science and conservation. But I wasn't fully convinced that was my path. As I was wrestling with these questions about my future, it was time to apply to college. I decided to major in religious philosophy, hoping to discover what I was meant to do. In Korea, healthy young men are required to serve about two years in the military. Before enlisting after my sophomore year, I made an effort to meet diverse people at university and often asked them: *What do you live for? Why did you choose this path?*

Thankfully, I adapted well to military life and had even more opportunities to meet different people. Military life was tough and exhausting, but I'm grateful for it because, during that time, I had no one to rely on but God. My relationship with God deepened, I experienced my parents' love more profoundly, and the Christian values and faith I once thought were cliché helped me endure that season. I also gained insights from meeting so many people.

I used to think that people who attended top universities or came from wealthy families must be happy, and I often envied them. But in the military, I met people from top schools and wealthy backgrounds, and they weren't all happy. That was a shock to me because I had assumed that going to a renowned school, having a high-paying job, or being wealthy would guarantee happiness.

This led me to wonder: If external conditions don't make people happy, what does? I realized that people's happiness no longer depends on external conditions, and at the same time, I became interested in inner health, especially spiritual health and spirituality.

I've shared a long story about myself, but here's the conclusion: we are happy when our souls are healthy. We are happy when we are close to God. Specifically, when we love and give to our neighbors as God loves us, we find happiness. This is the realization I came to after wandering and searching for my path.

I know some of you might find my conclusion cliché. I felt the same way once. There were times when I thought the teachings of the Bible were old-fashioned. But time passes quickly, and everything changes. Everything we own on this earth changes. What we think is cutting-edge today becomes outdated and disappears tomorrow. In a world where everything is constantly changing, the only one who loves us unchangingly is God, and the only one we can rely on is God.

I'm not saying money isn't important. I'm not saying good schools or nice cars don't matter. Honestly, money is very important for living. But what I'm saying is that money should not become the entirety of our lives, that money should not be the highest value in our lives. Money should not take priority over God. Money can never free us from worry and anxiety. The true meaning of our lives can only be found in God, and we experience happiness when we are close to Him—when we love, share, and help others.

It's graduation season. Some seniors have already graduated, and others will soon. Among the graduates, some may have clear dreams and plans, while others are still searching. Both are okay. Your 20s are a precious, once-in-a-lifetime season—a time to love purely, study, and explore. I hope graduates use this time meaningfully to wrestle with questions about their path, wander in search of life's meaning, meet diverse people, and travel, all while finding their own answers. But through those experiences, I pray you discover that the only eternal and unchanging thing in our lives is God.

May all of us here experience God's love deeply and pour that love out to our neighbors. Amen.