

Of Course Money Can Buy You Happiness

There is an abundance of clichés that have withstood the test of time. Many hold eternal truths. Others fail upon closer scrutiny. One cliché in particular of which I disagree is that money cannot buy you happiness.

I heard this cliché repeated most recently when the lottery jackpot reached record levels. The news media cycled through the unhappy lives of past winners, informing us of their disillusionment and shattered expectations.

Even the Bible claims: “For the love of money is the root of all kinds of evil.”

Happiness is highly subjective, a challenge to quantify, and evolves as we age. At one point in life popularity may make us happy. At other times good health, treasured friendships, accomplishments, healthy children, travel, or a wonderful marriage, may bring us greater happiness.

The pursuit of money is stressful. Keeping up with wealthy friends and associates, attempting to accumulate even more money, and the pace of the “rat race” can take its toll. Even when we possess a lot of money it is still human nature to be envious of those who possess even greater wealth. But in these examples, money is not the principal problem – it is our perspective of money. Notice that the Bible does not say that money itself is the problem, but rather it’s the “love of money” that is problematic.

Some material possessions can in fact bring us happiness. Nearly everyone has a collection of something they cherish: family pictures, music or movie collections, baseball cards, stamps, or coins. These collections provide us with a degree of happiness as we carefully acquire them over time – or even a lifetime.

When we acquire money overnight – say from a lottery winning – our material purchases tend to be of a different nature. Generally, we spend the money quickly and gleefully on copious quantities of possessions. Such spending generally results only in short-term happiness.

How much wiser it would be to delay that instant gratification, and instead pursue the things that make us truly happy.

Travel can leave us with a lifetime of wonderful memories. We can try

our hand at oil painting, learning a musical instrument, mastering a different language, or fulfilling other dreams. Donating money to a favorite charity can bring us a sense of satisfaction and purpose. We can enroll in college, and earn that degree we always wanted. Better education and greater job skills could lead to more job opportunities, and more career options. Ask anyone trapped in an unrewarding, dead-end job if they can put a price on that. Even doing nothing with money but putting it safely away in a bank can bring us a sense of security against any future financial disaster.

While there are no guarantees in life, money makes all of the above much more possible.

The conflict which arises is that earning a college degree, learning how to play a piano, or planning a dream vacation takes time. Human nature prefers immediate gratification.

Of course money cannot purchase permanent happiness. But what can? Perfect health? If you were never ill you would only take perfect health for granted. Love? Even love can be unrequited. Nothing buys us permanent happiness, but in life nothing is permanent anyway.

Why aren't lottery winners more happy? Perhaps there is a greater satisfaction in earning something rather than acquiring it through a random selection of numbers. Perhaps they assumed money would cure all of their problems, and their expectations exceeded their gratitude. Perhaps their winnings got in the way of what human beings truly cherish: relationships, memories, love, and accomplishment.

Happiness is evolving and transient, and money is not a prerequisite to attain it. Nevertheless, the acquisition of money, and the careful, wise ways in which we spend it can deeply enrich our lives.

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