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“For Mortals it is Impossible”

In 2010 Nobel Prize winners Daniel Kahneman and Angus Deaton came out with a revolutionary study which found that more money did not correlate with more happiness, at least up to a point. The exact finding revealed that after a household reached an annual income of \$75,000 (around \$109,000ish today) there was a plateau in happiness, meaning more money did not impact, or at least correlate to, more happiness. A groundbreaking finding for sure, hence their Nobel Prize. But, in 2021, with new technology and better ways to track participants, psychologist Matt Killingsworth found nearly the opposite result from his own data (i.e. more money, more happiness). And, while he was hesitant to reveal his work, knowing it could quite possibly undo some of the greatest behavioral psychological findings of our time, Killingsworth eventually published, not only suggesting, but essentially “proving” that more money can equal more happiness.

Today, in our Gospel passage from Mark, we are presented with the infamous story of the “rich young man”, who comes barreling down before Jesus. Stumbling over his robes as he chases after the Messiah crashing down to his knees and pleading “Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?” And, while Jesus responds, “well you know the commandments given to you by God.” The rich man says, “yes, yes, and I have kept all these since my youth.” “But still,” he exclaims, “something is missing. I can feel it in my bones.” And, this is my favorite part right here, as Jesus looks at him he “loves him.” Almost as if to say, “Oh my dear friend, I know you want more.” Going on to say (and here is not my favorite part), “You lack [just] one thing,” even though, it would seem, he poses everything he could possibly ever want or dream of, “go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me.”

After Killingsworth published his controversial data and findings, that more money did equal more happiness, Kahneman reached out to one of his colleagues and mentors, Barb Mellers. Asking, nonchalantly, if she might know Kahneman. To which she replied, “as a matter of fact, I do. And if you'd like me to introduce him to you, and if you'd like me to be an arbiter, I'd be happy to do that.” Danny Kahneman didn't want to take down Matt Killingsworth and his findings, but he did want to get to the truth of the matter. And so Killingsworth and Kahneman agreed to embark on what researchers refer to as an adversarial collaboration. Designing a study and writing a paper together, to sort out their scientific “beef” in the most fair and accurate way they knew how.

In Kahneman's study, with over 450,000 participants, he and Deaton found that, after the \$75,000 household income mark there was a notable plateau in happiness, i.e. happiness did not decrease or increase, but simply leveled out, at that income “sweet spot”. Whereas Killingsworth study found the opposite, as income levels increased so did happiness. And while Killingsworth, originally, set out simply to use a new technique to measure happiness by contacting people throughout the day via smartphones. As he continued his study, he realized, “hey I have this happiness scale along with the individual's income data, I wonder if I could see the Kahneman plateau? But, when he looked at his findings, and the happiness data related to the income levels he realized he didn't see the plateau but instead a steady correlation and incline, between happiness and income.

Ok, so if you're willing we're going to get a bit nerdy here. In Kahneman's study there were essentially three questions which participants could answer yes or no to: Did you smile or laugh a lot yesterday? Did you feel happiness a lot yesterday? How about enjoyment? But, in Killingsworth's study there was a range, from very happy to very sad, which meant he wasn't only measuring happiness, but sadness as well. Meaning Killingsworth wasn't really even studying happiness at all, but in fact unhappiness. And when they looked again, from the perspective of unhappiness, they found the plateau. Revealing that at the \$100,000 (to correct for inflation of course) money did not decrease or improve unhappiness.

As Jesus goes on to address his disciples he says, "Children, how hard it is to enter the kingdom of God! It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God." And, while I have heard some fabulous explanations for the camel through the eye of the needle. These "explanations," in my mind, largely negate Jesus' core message, and maybe moreover the power of God. Because, what Jesus is getting at here, is not that we are all damned to hell because of human striving and desire, I mean who doesn't want to be rich. But that for us mere mortals, salvation, or happiness for that matter, may very well be impossible, but for God (as Jesus tells us) all things are possible.

In the end of their research efforts Kahnemann and Killingsworth were able to conclude that while happiness may appear to increase with rising levels of income, the fact of the matter is that no matter how much money you have it cannot solve for all the variables of life that can lead to unhappiness, like heartbreak, depression, or grief. Moreover the two were able to find that the effect of money on happiness was actually pretty small, considering that this is just one aspect (money that is) of all the things that affect our overall emotional well-being, like social connections, life changes, sense of purpose and identity, exercise, and on and on and on. So often, it seems in life we go, if I can just achieve THIS (whatever it may be) I will be happy. Like the rich young man, if I can just know what to do to achieve eternal life I will have made it, but that's the thing, we can't do it on our own. Which, I believe, Kahnemann and Killingsworth's adversarial collaboration brilliantly pointed to. We need so much more, and that more, is only possibly when we look, I would argue, beyond ourselves and towards our God, our community, and our shared participation and responsibility in looking and working for the kingdom of God together here and now. A kingdom made not of money or maybe even of happiness, but of shared love and joy that comes only when we are able to give away our lives and ourselves for that love that loved us first. "For mortals it is impossible, but not for God; for God all things are possible."