Sermon Series: Words of Wisdom in a Whacked-Out World
Sermon Title: The Healing Power of a Happy Heart

Text: **Proverbs 12:25 -- Anxiety in a man's heart weighs him down, but a good word makes him glad**; **Proverbs 15:13 -- A glad heart makes a cheerful face, but by sorrow of heart the spirit is crushed**; **Proverbs 17:22 -- A joyful heart is good medicine, but a crushed spirit dries up the bones**

Introduction: **An optimist sees the best in the world, while a pessimist sees only the worst. An optimist finds the positive in the negative, and a pessimist can only find the negative in the positive**. This reminds me of an avid duck hunter who was in the market for a new bird dog. His search ended when he purchased one that could actually walk on water to retrieve a duck. **He was sure his best friend, a pessimist by nature, would never believe him**. That's why he decided that the only way to convince the man was to take him duck hunting and let his friend see the dog in action for himself. He invited his friend, and a couple of days later, there they were, waiting by the shore as a flock of Mallards flew by. They each fired, and a duck fell. **The dog responded and jumped out onto the pond. It did not sink, however, but instead walked across the water to retrieve the bird, never getting more than his paws wet**. This continued for the next few hours; each time a duck fell, the dog walked across the surface of the water to retrieve it. The pessimist watched carefully but did not say a single word. Later, on the drive home, the hunter asked his friend, "**Hey! Did you notice anything unusual about my new dog**?" "**Yeah, I sure did**," responded the pessimist. When we didn't say anything else, the hunter asked, "**And what might that be**?" His friend replied, "**Your dog can't swim**."

Let me ask you a question this morning, "**Do you see yourself as an optimist – a glass-half-full kind of person, or a pessimist – a glass-half-empty kind of person**? Whatever answer you give, I want you to know I'm not trying to pick on you. I think there is room for both in this world. It has been said that the optimist is the person who invented the AIRPLANE while the pessimist invented the PARACHUTE! I think we all agree that we need both. We need people who have a positive perspective on things, but we also need people who recognize that life doesn't always work out the way we want.

King Solomon seems to find this kind of realistic balance in some of his proverbs:

- **Proverbs 12:25 -- Anxiety in a man's heart weighs him down, but a good word makes him glad**. Some worrisome burdens in life seem to be unavoidable (when we lose our job, or a loved one's health is in decline), but a kind word can really help in times of discouragement.
- **Proverbs 13:12 -- Hope deferred makes the heart sick, but a desire fulfilled is a tree of life**. Hope is deferred when a promise remains unfulfilled for a long time. That can be hard on anyone who is looking forward to the fulfillment of the promise. But when that longing is finally met, the Bible says one's soul is revived.
- **Proverbs 14:10 -- The heart knows its own bitterness, and no stranger shares its joy**. No one can know the secret sorrows of another. We can only see the exterior and laughter MAY just be a mask concealing deep emotional pain. Only God can fully know what's in a person's heart, whether it is bitterness or joy.
- **Proverbs 15:13 -- A glad heart makes a cheerful face, but by sorrow of heart the spirit is crushed**. This is saying that when we have a cheerful heart, it cannot help but be reflected in one's countenance. On the other hand, the depression of heartache is also obvious to everyone else.
- **Proverbs 17:22 – A joyful (merry -- KJV) heart is good medicine, but a crushed spirit dries up the bones.** Believe it or not, there is a relationship between the condition of the heart and the condition of the body. GOOD NEWS THAT LIFTS OUR SPIRIT GIVES HEALTH TO THE BONES! That is what is being said here. The opposite is also true. BAD NEWS THAT CRUSHES OUR SPIRIT TAKES THE LIFE RIGHT OUT OF US**. If you're not familiar with this verse, now you know that the Bible first proclaimed what Reader's Digest has**

been saying for years -- laughter really is the best medicine. **Brooke Steinberg of the New York Post** shares the results of **a cardiac health study** that confirms what a good belly laugh can do for someone. **She writes**: Even a mere chuckle is enough to expand cardiac tissue and increase the flow of oxygen throughout the body, thus exercising a weakened heart, according to a new study. **Scientists in Brazil set** out to prove that "**laughter therapy**" can improve cardiovascular health and ease symptoms of heart disease. **Professor Marco Saffi** said, **"Our study found that laughter therapy increased the functional capacity of the cardiovascular system**." Researchers looked at 26 adults, at an average age of 64 who had previously been diagnosed with coronary artery disease. **Every week for three months, half of the group viewed comedy programs while the other half watched serious documentaries about topics such as the Amazon rainforest or politics**. Results showed that the group who watched comedies had a significant advancement in the amount of oxygen the heart could pump into the body as well as an improvement in their arteries' ability to expand. Blood testing also detected **notable reductions in inflammatory biomarkers**, which can indicate if people are at risk for heart attack or stroke and show how much plaque is built up in blood vessels. **It's believed that laughter has this effect because it releases ENDORPHINS, which are needed to maintain healthy blood pressure and reduce strain on the heart by keeping stress hormones low**. **Saffi** says, "**This study found that laughter therapy is a good intervention that could help reduce … inflammation and decrease the risk of heart attack and stroke. People should try to do things that make them laugh at least twice a week. Laughing helps people feel happier overall**." (*Brooke Steinberg, "Laughter can heal a broken heart — literally: cardiac health study," New York Post (8/28/23*)). A MERRY HEART IS, IN FACT, GOOD MEDICINE!

This morning, as we continue in our series "**Words of Wisdom for a Whacked-Out (Crazy) World**, I want to try to answer the question, "**How can we, as believers in Jesus Christ, possess a MERRY HEART in a world where sorrow and pain are real and almost daily occurrences?**" I would propose these two answers:

- **First, start with this BELIEF**. **Romans 8:28** says, "**And we know that God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose**" – NASB. The world is not a safe place. It is filled with sin, sickness, heartache, and despair. Fortunately, as Christians, we know that Jesus came into the world some two thousand years ago to deliver us from PENALTY of sin (i.e. **the wages of sin is death** – **Romans 6:23 – Jesus paid the price of our sin by offering up His own life**), the POWER of sin (we were **slaves to sin** – **Romans 6:16 –** we have become **slaves to obedience**), and someday the PRESENCE of sin (**Revelation 21:4** – in heaven there will be -- **no more death or mourning or crying or pain** – all caused by sin). We now have salvation, healing, and hope through faith in His sacrifice on the cross to atone for our sins. And that's where **Romans 8:28** comes into play. Because in placing our faith in Jesus, we're declaring our love for Him and our trust that He is working for our good. The words "**all things**" are very important. They tell us how inclusive this promise is. IT IS ALL-INCLUSIVE! Nothing happens in the life of a child of God, not anything good or bad, that is not included in it. **The promise is that God will work FOR OUR GOOD in any and every circumstance in life**. Listen, a merry heart is important because, in it, God is saying to us, "**I want you to know that in every moment of life, in all the blessings as well as the things that you don't seem to understand, in the heartache and pain that goes beyond anything you thought you could endure; I am doing something good for you. I am working out my plan for your life to mold you into the very character and image of my Son – Jesus Christ. So, take heart, my child. Be of good cheer**!" So, the next time you're in a hospital waiting room or receive a notice that you've been laid off, or are trying to console a child whose friend wants nothing more to do with him or her, that would be a good time to proclaim, "**God is at work**." This verse, **Romans 8:28**, reminds us that whether we see it or not, whether we feel it or not, whether we understand it or not, God is doing something that will result in our good. And that attitude can make all the difference!

I haven't shared many of the details with you regarding why I left my former church, but I can tell you that when we were told our services were no longer needed after nearly twenty years of ministry, it was devastating to both of us. We knew that there were some issues, but always felt that they could be resolved. I remember calling Laurie to tell her that it was over. Both of us were in shock. Shortly after that, Pastor Rick asked me what I was going to do. I said, "**I'm going to plant a church**." That's when Rick told me that he believed God was calling both he and Jan to partner with us in this new endeavor. It has been nearly seven years since we started River Ridge Church with a group of about seventy-five people. A lot has happened since including the merger of River Ridge with Spring Grove Bible Fellowship. Today, we have two churches, one in Spring Grove and one in Trevor. Our combined attendance is now about four times as much as when we started. We now have seven part-time or full-time staff and a lot of volunteers who labor in love for the cause of Christ at both locations. Pastor Rick and I were talking about how it all came to be this past Wednesday. **When I submitted my resignation letter to my former church, it was a real gut punch. Today, I see it very differently. I am so grateful for what the Lord has done and can't think of a place I'd rather be than here with all of you**. Once again God has demonstrated to me the truth of **Romans 8:28**. He has worked "all things" together for good and I couldn't be more pleased with the outcome He had in mind all along. (**Review: Start with this belief**.)

Then, practice these BEHAVIORS. I have shared many times that **our behaviors follow our beliefs**. Rarely, will human beings consistently act contrary to what they believe. Now, if you believe **Romans 8:28** and **Proverbs 17:22 (A joyful heart is good medicine)** then your behaviors (WHAT YOU DO) will follow suit. **Here are some specific things you can do that will produce in you a cheerful heart**.

- **You can do what is right**. This was the counsel that God gave to Cain when he was distraught over the offering that he made that was rejected by God. The Lord said to Cain, "**If you do what is right, will not your countenance be lifted up**?" Do you get what He was saying? Cain's life was out of sync with God. His heart was not in the right place. If it was, then God would have accepted his offering of the fruit of the ground and he would have been cheerful about it. That's why God encouraged him to do what is right. Doing what is right can be its own reward in that we feel good about it. It lifts our countenance!
- **You can give thanks in everything**. We are told to do this in **1 Thessalonians 5:16 – Give thanks in all circumstances for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you**. The key phrase here is "**in all circumstances**." **It means just what you think it means**. No matter what you're going through, whether good or bad, God wants you to give thanks to Him. You may be wondering why this is vital to having a merry heart. But think about it. **When you have enough faith to recognize that God will use any particular BLESSING OR TRIAL in your life for your good and His glory, it completely changes the way you approach the situations in your life**. Isn't this what **Romans 8:28** is all about?
- **You can forgive those who have hurt you**. I talked about this last week in relation to any unresolved anger you may have for someone else. As long as you fail to forgive, you are the one kept in bondage by your anger. ***Now here's another thought for you***. **Did you know that the failure to forgive can not only negatively impact your relationship with God, but it can also lead to physical suffering**? This is what **researchers at Johns Hopkins University** discovered. They have found that whether it's a simple spat with your spouse or long-held resentment toward a family member or friend, unresolved conflict can go deeper than you may realize—it may be affecting your physical health. **The good news**: Studies have found that the act of forgiveness can reap huge rewards for your health, lowering the risk of heart attack; improving cholesterol levels and sleep; and reducing pain, blood pressure, and levels of anxiety, depression and stress. And research points to an increase in the forgiveness-health connection as you age. "**There is an enormous physical burden to being hurt and disappointed**," says **Karen Swartz, M.D., director of the Mood Disorders Adult Consultation Clinic at The Johns Hopkins Hospital**. Chronic anger puts you into a fight-or-flight mode, which results in numerous changes in heart rate, blood pressure, and immune response. Those changes, then, increase the risk of depression, heart disease, and diabetes,

among other conditions. Forgiveness, however, calms stress levels, leading to improved health. IT SURELY SEEMS THAT GOD HAS HARD-WIRED OUR BODIES SO THAT WE ARE MUCH BETTER OFF WHEN WE FORGIVE!

- **You can set your mind on things above**. We're told by the Lord that Christians will suffer for our faith. He said this in **Matthew 5:11-12 -- Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you, and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me. Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven**. The Apostle Paul tells us how this is possible in **Colossians 3:2-4 -- Set your mind on the things above, not on the things that are on earth. For you have died and your life is hidden with Christ in God. When Christ, who is our life, is revealed, then you also will be revealed with Him in glory**. Some people refer to this as having an eternal mindset. Because we know that the suffering of this world will not last, we do not despair. ***In fact, we can be GLAD knowing that when Christ, who is now glorified and sits at the right hand of God, returns, we will share in His glory***.
- **You can give attention to the needs of others**. Doing good feels good. That's because God made us for this purpose (**For we are God's workmanship created in Christ Jesus for good works – Ephesians 2:10**). Whenever we deny ourselves and take action to bless others, it brings a smile to our face. SO, THE NEXT TIME YOU'RE FEELING A LITTLE BLUE AND WONDERING WHAT YOU CAN DO TO IMPROVE YOUR STATE OF MIND, TRY FOCUSING ON THE NEEDS OF SOMEONE ELSE.

Conclusion: **Stephen G. Post, professor of bioethics at Case Western Reserve University School of Medicine**, headed a comprehensive study of altruism. What is altruism? **It is the unselfish concern for the welfare of others**. Post evaluated **50 scientific studies** of people who regularly volunteered their time. One of the studies, from **Cornell University**, spent 30 years and followed 427 women who were married and had children. Researchers found that only 36 percent of those women who REGULARLY VOLUNTEERED had experienced a major illness, while 52 percent of those who NEVER VOLUNTEERED had a major illness. Post writes, "**Surprisingly, they found that numbers of children, education, class, and work status did not affect longevity**." But, volunteering did! Other studies indicated that those who volunteered their time LIVED LONGER than those who didn't. People who volunteered frequently had **a 44 percent reduction in early death when compared to non-volunteers**. Scientists also identified precise areas of the brain that are highly active during empathic and compassionate emotions. Commenting on these areas, Post said: This is extremely important. This is the care-and-connection part of the brain. It is a very different part of the brain than that which is active with romantic love. These brain studies show this profound state of joy and delight that comes from giving to others. It doesn't come from any dry action—where the act is out of duty in the narrowest sense, like writing a check for a good cause. **It comes from working to cultivate a generous quality— from interacting with people. There is the smile, the tone in the voice, the touch on the shoulder. We're talking about altruistic love**. (*Jeanie Lerche Davis, "The Science of Good Deeds" webmd.com (11-28-05)*

We began this message with this question: **How can we, as believers in Jesus Christ, possess a MERRY HEART in a world where sorrow and pain are real and almost daily occurrences?** And we said the answer is found in **our BELIEF** that God works all things together for the good of those who love Him and are called according to His purpose and **the BEHAVIORS that follow**. DOING WHAT IS RIGHT, GIVING THANKS IN EVERYTHING, FORGIVING THOSE WHO HAVE HURT YOU, SETTING YOUR MIND ON THINGS ABOVE AND GIVING ATTENTION TO THE NEEDS OF OTHERS. Let's pray.