

Reviews of *The Lost Virtue of Happiness*

Publisher's Weekly Review

Starting from the American "pursuit of happiness," Moreland (a philosophy professor at Talbot School of Theology, Biola University) and Issler (a Christian education and theology professor, also at Talbot) connect with a widely felt desire. Yet they immediately take readers into deeper reflection of the very content of the happiness we pursue, arguing that our consumerist culture has replaced the more satisfying content of true happiness with a poor substitute. Moving smoothly into a discussion of discipleship, they focus on spiritual disciplines as the key to true happiness in life. Subsequent chapters explore how the spiritual disciplines can be used to improve many areas of our lives—emotions, thoughts, risk taking and the development of a more mature faith during difficult times. They end with a convincing chapter on the importance of spiritual friendships. Although exploring some deep topics, this will still be accessible to most readers and very useful for study groups, particularly with the excellent discussion questions at the end of each chapter. The practical suggestions and creative exercises throughout will be particularly helpful for those new to spiritual disciplines. (Feb.) Copyright 2005 Reed Business Information.

HAPPINESS: The Way it Was Meant to Be, July 27, 2006

Reviewer: Joseph E. Gorra "Joe Gorra"

JP Moreland and Klaus Issler ransom the contemporary idea of "happiness" from the obsessive, authoritarian grips of pleasure-seeking narcissism, and cleanse it with biblical counsel, Spirit-led wisdom, pastoral insight, and the demonstrable lessons of their own life lived in the fellowship of others. Their thesis is articulated in eight life-empowering chapters, which claims that happiness is best understood and obtained if it means living our life as it is meant to flourish. We are meant to flourish in a life of character and virtue formation that manifests itself in wisdom, kindness and goodness (25).

The life of Jesus Christ and the gospel of the kingdom of God are both the indispensable model and means for obtaining this kind of abundant life. Chapter One and Two both (authored by Moreland) establish this foundational claim. Chapter Three (Issler), Four (Moreland) and Five (Issler) form a unit to give clear instruction and pastoral insight about how to get good at living this kind of life: Namely, form a tender, receptive heart (ch. 3); form a thoughtful mind stayed on God (ch. 4); form a trustful will that risks with God (ch. 5). With the foundation laid in chapters one and two, and the edifice formed in chapters three, four and five, this house of edification is nearly complete. But first, Chapter Six (Issler) and Seven (Moreland) tests a biblical conception of human flourishing in light of the so-called "hiddenness of God" (ch. 6) and in view of experiencing anxiety and depression (ch. 7). These two chapters form a potent unit of instruction and insight, encouraging the reader to embrace the reality of God's hiddenness and to learn not to just "cope" with anxiety and depression but to actually defeat its control over one's ability to flourish. I found these chapters to be liberating, helpful, and truthfully conveyed. Moreland openly shares his experience and defeat of anxiety and depression. This testimony should encourage anyone who is afflicted with such struggle. Lastly, Chapter Eight (Issler) caps the entire discussion of the book with a focus on "cultivating spiritual friendships."

Typically, I would expect Chapters Three, Four and Five to be part of a book on spiritual formation, even though the authors offer a decisively unique perspective on these topics. However, it is Chapters Six and Seven that make the book all the more accessible and authoritative. For these chapters demonstrate that the ideas conveyed in the previous chapters are not only true, but because they are true, they actually work and are livable even in the crucible of life's most desperate circumstances.

Structurally, each chapter faithfully maintains a length of 24 pages. This consistency appropriately informs the reader's attention and forms the reader's expectation. This prudential proportionality of space

demonstrates that the authors do not overstate or understate one topic over another. Visually, the text actually appeals to the eyes. The lines have generous spacing and the fonts are crisp. Each page does not feel like it is informationally overloaded. The ideas expressed and the space and words that are used to fulfill that expression are prudentially balanced.

Moreover, instructional helps and end-of-chapter exercises are found throughout the book. These are not superficial or ineffectual, but encourage the reader to give careful attention to what they are reading and to do so while attending to their own life. For example, there is an informative chart on page 26 that offers a succinct contrast between "Contemporary Happiness" (pleasurable satisfaction) and "Classical Happiness" (virtue and well-being). On page 117, Issler captures "Five Enduring Kingdom Themes" (Loving God, Relating, Reigning, Renewing and Resisting) in the form of a circular diagram. And in this same chapter about learning to form a trusting will, Issler provides (p. 125-26) an "Eternal Investment Portfolio" (EIP) to gauge how we are investing our lives now in view of how we will live eternally. Lastly, on 197-8, Issler provides an in-text questionnaire to discern a "Close Friendship Quotient" (CFQ). The end-of-chapter exercises strike a brilliant balance between a summary of the chapter's main content and a creative way to receive and digest the significance of what the authors intend.

The book is wisely and strategically co-authored. Moreland and Issler draw from each other's interrelated contributions and insights on the topic. I would characterize this book as the merging of two streams, each author drawing from and extending their most notable offerings on spiritual formation to date. In addition, their 25-year friendship adds further credence to their credibility, especially when they authoritatively model to the reader what it means to "cultivate spiritual friendships." The treatment of their topic is not just mere "biblical exposition" with no end in sight, or exposition with no insight. It is a beautifully written account from a first-person perspective that is also informed in the tradition of other's experiences, culminating in existentially relevant words of encouragement and biblical instruction. Scripture is handled in an exegetically honest and hermeneutically informed way. Therefore, it bears honorable likeness, credibility and seriousness to a peer-reviewed but without being stuffy, or taken too seriously because it is "academic." For this reason, I would have no hesitation or feel no embarrassment to give the book to an honest, truth-seeking Christian academic or to a spiritually hungry layperson.

The tone serves both the academic and layperson beneficially. Indeed, this is one of the notable accomplishments of the book. Only a senseless and apathetic reader would not be able to detect the vulnerability, authenticity, and pastoral care for people's well-being that is voluminously present in the text. When I read the book, I actually had a keen sense that I was being shepherded and pastorally instructed in how I am to live my life well in the kingdom of God. This has not always been my experience when reading other so-called "spiritual formation" books.

When reading other books about the "inner" spiritual life, sometimes the discussion unnecessarily becomes gendered and therefore complicated. But this is not the case for Moreland and Issler's book. I would have no reservation in giving this to a male or female friend. Emotionally attentive men and thoughtful women (neither of which is an oxymoron!) will receive enlightenment about their lives in this book, even though the discussion is not intended to be gendered. I think this will be one of the long-lasting gifts of the book.

The remarkable legacy of the book, I believe, is its ability to successfully provide instruction and pastoral insight in and from a biblical conception of human flourishing that is rooted in what it means to live as an apprentice of Jesus Christ. The authors joyfully and eagerly call people to get good at living their lives in the manner that Jesus lived his life. Having tested and tried the ideas and exercises of this book, I can honestly report that I am a better person because of it.