The English philosopher Jeremy Bentham, who in addition to having had himself stuffed and put in a glass case at University College London, developed something known as utilitarianism or the greatest happiness principle. Put in his own words, “it is the greatest happiness of the greatest number that is the measure of right and wrong." He, of course, elaborated more than that but the gist of his argument was that societal decisions should be based on providing the most happiness for the most people by increasing pleasure and decreasing pain. In his system, personal happiness is the highest good. And this is one of those propositions that is dangerous to argue against because in so doing it can seem like you want fewer people to be happy. So instead of a head on assault I want to quibble with the word happiness and ask if it is a robust enough idea to be labeled as the highest good.

If we want to get all high school debate team about this, we should start by defining the word happy which is, “feeling or showing pleasure or contentment.” Which sounds nice but it also presents us with a problem and that is the fact that it is a very subjective state. What I mean by this is that if somehow you had a machine that would light up every time someone had this feeling of happiness and then attempted to figure out what caused it you would see a whole host of results of which many would be contradictory. For example, you could take someone like our former deacon Bramwell Richards to a Barry Manilow concert and his happiness light would be burning like a tiger in a William Blake poem. However, if you took me to this same concert it would be the equivalent of sticking me in the sixth circle of hell inside a flaming tomb. But the problem goes further than Barry Manilow because it is not just differences between individual ideas of happiness but there are inconsistencies within ourselves as well. Things that made me happy when I was in college would make me miserable now, like staying up until three in the morning or eating chili dogs from 7-11. It is because of this inability to agree on required actions it would seem that it might not be the best system by which to govern a society. And while not directly addressing the Copacabana, this morning St. Paul talks about what should and what should not be the animating principle in our lives. And just as a little spoiler his answer is not happiness. He says, “You were dead through the trespasses and sins in which you once lived, following the course of this world, following the ruler of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work among those who are disobedient. All of us once lived among them in the passions of our flesh, following the desires of flesh and senses, and we were by nature children of wrath, like everyone else.”

Paul is talking about how his audience was before they became Christian and how that made them act. The word he uses to describe this state is the fulfilling of the desires of the flesh, which to Paul is not just things carnal but rather encompass all things that are not of God. So, the state before becoming Christian was largely one where they followed their own desires and wants hoping to find happiness and fulfillment. And since they were living without God. everything was done based on whether or not it fulfilled their wants and desires. But Paul says that such an approach leads to destruction, because we are so unreliable in knowing the right thing to do. We go chasing things that we believe will make us happy but ultimately find these things turn us into children of wrath. Here is an example of what I mean.

Let’s for a moment take a journey back to the 80’s and look at a popular German Sedan named the Audi 5000. If you remember this car you may also remember that it was associated with something known as unintended acceleration. What supposedly happened was that people would go and innocently start up their Audis and while their foot was securely pressed on the brake the car would speed off and crash into things no matter how much pressure was applied to the brake. The show 60 Minutes famously ran a story which claimed to show this exact phenomenon. It was later revealed that the car had been modified and that they had engineered the vehicle's behavior – fitting a canister of compressed air on the passenger-side floor, to pump fluid via a hose to a hole drilled into the transmission. So, what really happened to these supposedly demon possessed Audis? The truth is actually not all that exciting. What was ultimately determined was that Audi had placed the brake and the gas pedal closer together than most Americans were used to. So rather than demonic possession originating in Ingolstadt, people were mistaking the gas pedal for the brake pedal and jamming their foot on the gas while all the time believing that they were pressing the brake. In many ways this is what happens when we make ourselves and our desires the central factor in all of our decisions. We think, like Bentham speculates, that we are going to be made happy by maximizing our pleasure and minimizing our pain. But it does not work and rather than take our foot off the accelerator we press down harder believing that by so doing we will gain the happiness we seek. People who experienced what was called unintended acceleration were actually creating intended acceleration. The car was doing what they told it to do but they thought they were telling it to do the opposite. Similarly, when we do what we think will make us happy, we often find that we are less happy. If you don’t believe me ask yourself this question. For much of recent memory the education system, Carl Jung, Disney princesses and whoever else you want to throw in the mix have told us that we need to follow our hearts. We are now knee deep in heart following and so I ask, are we happy? Has our headlong rush into placing our desires at the center of the cosmos lead to a society of sunshine and lollipops? Unless I am missing something, we seem pretty miserable as a society these days. And yet whenever we ask what we can do about it, the answer is always that we need more cowbell. In other words, the reason we are told that we are unhappy is because someone or something is preventing us from fully developing ourselves. We believe that we just need to fully throw off the chains that society is weighing us down with and truly follow the devices and desires of our own hearts. But that is not what we hear today.

Thomas a Kempis said “The more humility you have and the more subject you are to God, the wiser you will be, and the more at peace.” This is a shift from what Bentham has told us, not only in where we are to find answers but also the ultimate goal. Bentham says that our instincts will steer us to happiness but we so often go the wrong way and in looking for happiness we often find despair. The formula St. Paul and Thomas a Kempis give to us is to lose our will and submit to God and then, through this, we will find peace and rest for our souls. To my mind happiness is a byproduct of peace and as a result of this peace should really be our goal. And peace is found in Christ. The great automotive engineer Colin Chapman had a famous line when talking about what was needed to make a better race car saying that “to add speed” you needed to “add lightness.” That is the less stuff you were able to put on the faster your car would be. I think we may need to add lightness to our lives. We keep thinking that one more wish fulfilled or desire satiated we will find joy and happiness, but maybe it is in removing all of the desires of our will that we find this peace, contentment and ultimately happiness. The more lightness we add the more we can walk in God’s will and delight in his ways so that we may be his, this day and forevermore.