

John 16.16-24

Choosing Joy

Sermon #5 in a Series on Biblical Change and the Fruit of the Spirit

Preached by Pastor Glenn Durham at Dominion Covenant Church, Omaha, Nebraska, on June 26, 2005.

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Main Idea: *Those who know Christ are buoyed by joy even in the middle of an ocean of sorrow.*

Scripture Introduction

Galatians 5.22-24 tells us: “The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, longsuffering, kindness, goodness, faithfulness,²³ gentleness, self-control. Against such there is no law.²⁴ And those who are Christ's have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires.”

It is my hope, when I am privileged to preach, for us to consider together the fruit of the Spirit, this overflow of lives united to Christ and growing in grace. To that end, we consider today the second part of the fruit of Galatians 5, joy.

Bruce Larson (*Luke*, p. 43), tells of a conference at a Presbyterian church where people were given helium-filled balloons and told to release them during the service when they felt like expressing the joy in their hearts. Since they were Presbyterians, they were not free to say “Hallelujah, Praise the Lord.” All through the service balloons ascended, but when it was over, one-third of the balloons were still held. Whatever we think of that church's program, this is surely true: many Christians lack joy. Let's think about that as we study John 16 and related texts this morning. Read John 16.16-24. Pray.

Introduction

In a quotation which John Piper has made well known, **C. S. Lewis** said, “Indeed, if we consider the unblushing promises of reward and the staggering nature of the rewards promised in the Gospels, it would seem that Our Lord finds our desires not too strong, but too weak. We are half-hearted creatures, fooling about with drink and sex and ambition when infinite joy is offered us, like an ignorant child who wants to go on making mud pies in a slum because he cannot imagine what is meant by the offer of a holiday at the sea. We are far too easily pleased.”

At the same time, we all know (and maybe it is true of us) that many Christians are still “holding their balloons.” Between our jobs and our spouse, because of guilt or rebellion, many believers have little or no joy. The promises of joy made by God, combined with exhortations from pastors and well-meaning friends have only served to highlight the lack of happiness which too often controls our lives. From where does true joy come and what shall we do if it eludes us?

Galatians 5 is clear—to pursue joy requires mortification of the flesh. **Flannery O'Connor** was correct as she described self-denial: “Always you renounce a lesser good for a greater; the opposite is sin. Picture me with my ground teeth stalking joy—fully armed too, as it's a highly dangerous quest.”

How shall we stalk joy?

1. We Must Embrace the Biblical Definition of Joy (John 16.22)

“Joy” and related words like “rejoice” and “joyful,” occur over 400 times in the Bible. Additionally there are words like, “delight” and “happy” and their cognates. Clearly joy is a common idea in the Scriptures! No wonder **C. S. Lewis**, wrote in a personal letter: “It is a Christian duty, as you know, for everyone to be as happy as he can.”

If your religion knows no place for jump up and down joy, then (I want to say this respectfully and courteously, but say it we must)—if your religion has no room for jump and down joy, then your religion is not Biblical Christianity.

Now some object, saying that *duty* is the main emphasis of faith. Yes, duty is essential to religion. There are times for “grind-it-out” obedience to God when the world around and sinful desires within make holiness a misery. Still others object on the grounds that life in a fallen world is too full of suffering to make joy a centerpiece of true religion. In one church I pastored, during a time of strenuous preaching on mortification of the flesh, one of the ladies suggested that our church motto be: “Such-and-such church: we hate it too.” God was loving on us in great waves of sanctification and it pained the flesh and seemed to produce anything other than joy.

And yet, in the face of such objections, the Bible insists that to know God is joy. Jesus in John 15: “These things I have spoken to you that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be full.” Psalm 16.11: “In your presence is fullness of joy; at your right hand are pleasures forevermore.” God is both the *source* of joy (therefore we ask him to “restore to us the joy of our salvation” (Psalm 51.12)), and he is the *object* of joy: “my soul will rejoice in the Lord, exulting in his salvation” (Psalm 35.9). Right worship is called the “sacrifice of joy,” primarily because the God whom we worship is himself full of joy! He rejoices over his work and over his people, singing over them with joy and delighting to do them good!

Jesus rejoiced in the Spirit and so enjoyed feasting that he was derided as a “glutton and drunkard” (Matthew 11.19). He even tells us to “rejoice and be glad” (Matthew 5.12). Is it any wonder that Paul commands the believers in Thessalonica to “Rejoice always” (1Thessalonians 5.16); and those in Philippi to “Rejoice in the Lord” (Philippians 3.1). For the church in Rome he prays, “May the God of all hope fill you with joy in believing” (Romans 15.13); and to the Corinthians, he writes: “Finally, brothers, rejoice” (2Corinthians 13.11). Paul never picked up a pen that did not prescribe joy!

Biblical Christianity expects a “jump-up-and-down joy.”

But that is not the whole picture, is it? What are some other truths about joy and their implications?

1.1. Biblical Joy Does Not Eliminate Sorrow

The same Bible which so insists on joy, is also realistic about suffering and sadness. Jesus illustrates this with a woman in labor. Obviously, I have no *personal* experience, but I was present for the birth of both Daniel and Rebekah. Based on Helen’s response, I assure you that Genesis 3.16 is true: “...In pain you shall bring forth children.” Labor is great sorrow.

But what happens after birth? The pain did not go away; but for a season, the joy of a new baby overwhelmed it. The joy of *her* child buoys the mother out of the deluge of pain. The sorrow becomes unimportant compared to the greatness of the joy.

Clearly from the text, Jesus wants us to apply this illustration to the whole of our Christian life. He says right here, though we will lament and weep and be sorrowful, our sorrow will be turned to joy.

Maybe I can extend the illustration to one our children can especially understand. On their birthday, our children often receive gifts. Some produce joy in their own right—they are what we want and what we want badly. Children often squeal in delight over these presents. But

some of the presents produce less of that sensation, do they not? One times my kids received an envelop with a US Savings Bond. Now that is a great gift. But the instant, emotional response is disappointment. What should be the response in the midst of the feeling of “sorrow”? What we have tried to teach our kids is that they are to rejoice, not so much over the gift, but over the fact that someone loves them enough to give them gifts. Grandma may give you a pair of socks; joy comes when you realize that you have a grandmother who loves you enough to buy you a gift.

And so the Bible tells us that we can have joy in the midst of sorrow and suffering. How? Because we know the Father who loves us enough to give us all good gifts.

Let me show you some Christians who did just this. Turn in your Bible, please, to 2Corinthians 8.

2Corinthians 8.1,2: “Moreover, brethren, we make known to you the grace of God bestowed on the churches of Macedonia: ² that *in a great trial of affliction* the abundance of *their joy* and their deep poverty *abounded* in the riches of their liberality.”

Do you see it—Joy abounding in the midst of trials? Jesus teaches that the same joy can be ours, even in affliction. Turn, please to Matthew 5.

Matthew 5.11-12: “Blessed are you when they revile and persecute you, and say all kinds of evil against you falsely for My sake. ¹² Rejoice and be exceedingly glad, for great is your reward in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you.”

Now we are starting to fill out a Biblical description of joy, are we not? 1) Christianity and joy must go together; 2) This joy does not eliminate sorrow.

1.2. Biblical Joy is Supernatural

This should be clear since Galatians 5 tells us that joy is a fruit of the Holy Spirit. What are the implications of this truth?

1st, Biblical joy cannot be manufactured: we cannot stir it up on our own but must **depend** upon our union with Christ for it.

2nd, Biblical joy is not natural: to have it there must also be the crucifixion of the flesh, the denial to myself of my natural passions and desires.

3rd, Biblical joy requires faith—I must believe the promises and receive all that God is for me in Jesus Christ.

4th (and will cover this more later), Biblical joy must be prayed for, sought after, and stirred up. This joy is not the natural welling up of the feelings I have when I get what I want; instead, it is something outside of me which I must seek, even as I seek the Lord.

So far,

1. Biblical Christianity seems to involve a jump up and down joy.
2. Biblical Joy coexists with sorrow.
3. Biblical joy is supernatural.

1.3. Biblical Joy is More than Feelings

It seems that one reason Christians lack joy is we are waiting for certain feelings to strike us. Without the feelings of joy, we may assume there is no hope for joy.

Yet Biblical joy does not come first and foremost from the feelings of happiness which well up inside us when we get what we want. If it did, you could not have joy in the midst of affliction. *Biblical joy comes not from delightful circumstances, but from knowing that the God who controls the circumstances is delightful.*

“Rejoice,” says Jesus, “and be glad,” not because you are persecuted, but rather because “your reward is great in heaven.” God is allowing difficulty into our lives so that, by our joy in

the midst of suffering, we can demonstrate our faith in a reward so great that the sufferings here are inconsequential.

Paul says virtually the same thing in Romans 8: “I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing to the glory which will be revealed.”

In the great trial of affliction, the abundance of joy of the Macedonian Christians abounded. “Count it all joy when you meet trials of various kinds, for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness” (James 1.2).

International Standard Bible Encyclopedia: “Christian joy is no mere gaiety that knows no gloom, but is the result of the triumph of faith over adverse and trying circumstances, which, instead of hindering, actually enhance it (Acts 5:41; Romans 5:3 f; James 1:2,12; 5:11; 1Peter 4:13; compare Matthew 5:11,12). Even our Lord Himself ‘for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising shame’ (Hebrews 12:2).”

Imagine being shipwrecked in the Atlantic Ocean and the only thing preventing your drowning is a life-preserver which buoys you slightly above the water. Being in the ocean with a life-preserver is better than being in the ocean without one, is it not? But even so, it is not quite like being on land, is it?

I think this can be a parable for the place of joy in a Christian’s life. We live outside Eden, and life in this fallen world has evil and suffering that is a bit like being shipwrecked in the ocean. But the Christian has God’s Holy Spirit which buoys her out of the water, out of the despair experienced by those without hope.

All of that said, however, we remember that the Christian still suffers the storms in life. It may be the death of a spouse, the news of cancer, or the pink slip which raises ocean waves higher than your head.

And though we may be tempted to cast aside the life-preserver of joy because it does not meet our expectation of calming the storm, those who cling to joy find that even great waves cannot remove the feeling of buoyancy which a Christian experiences, because she knows she is safe. In fact, is this not true: do not the storms sometimes increase your joy as they remind you of how wonderful the life-preserver really is. You are not yet lifted safe to dry land, but the one who threw to you the life-preserver yet holds the end of the rope and is dragging you to complete safety. Joy keeps us buoyed in the sorrow while we are being brought to dry land.

I would pull these ideas together into this definition: Biblical joy is the fruit of union with Christ and the work of the Holy Spirit which is received by faith and which buoys the believer with hope and happiness even in the midst of a sea of suffering.

If you want that joy, then there are a other things you must do.

2. We Must Deny Ourselves the Opposite of Joy: Despair

We might guess that the opposite of joy is sadness. But that is probably not strictly accurate. Since Biblical joy would seem to coexist with sadness, I think we would should say that the opposite of Biblical joy is despair. Thus Paul can say, in **1Thessalonians 4.13**: that when your loved ones die, “do not grieve like the rest of men, who have no hope.” Christians must grieve; a true believer is honest about the suffering in life. But we do **not** grieve *like the rest of men who despair*. Christian grief is grief buoyed out of the ocean of despair by joy, because a Christian knows the God who keeps his life forever safe.

This is exactly how Psalms 42 and 43 teach us to preach the gospel to ourselves: “Why are you cast down, O my soul, and why are you in turmoil within me? Hope in God; for I shall again praise him, my salvation and my God.”

Despair is an alluring temptation. It allows us to feel sorry for ourselves, to blame others for our failures and faults, to complain that we have not been treated fairly. Yet such must be resisted, for it is the work of the flesh which refuses to hope in God.

3. We Must Be Cautious of the Counterfeit of Joy: Ease (Life without Storms, Calm Seas)

If Biblical joy buoys the believer with hope and happiness even in the midst of a sea of suffering, then the counterfeit of biblical joy is the feelings of happiness and hope which come during calms in the ocean storms.

There is nothing wrong with a calm sea. But it is so easy to mistake a delight in a calm seas for the joy of a buoyant life-preserver.

When your spouse is serving you unselfishly, your children are obeying your thoughts before you utter them, the paperboy delivers on the doorstep and you got both a raise and an attaboy from your boss—of course you are happy and there is a spring in your step. But what about when your spouse is demanding, lacks understanding, and insists all the problems are your fault? What about when the kids refuse to obey anything, the paper is in the mud and the you are fired? When your friends are mean and the only presents you get are woolen underwear? What about the stormy trials in the sea of life? It is then that the counterfeit is exposed; it is then that I most need help grabbing the life preserver. How do I do so?

4. We Must Actively Cultivate True Joy

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4.1. Read the Biblical Promises of Joy

Faith comes by hearing the Word of God. Read of the joy promised those who know Christ. Read of the God of joy. Memorize and meditate upon passages which tell you of the joy of God. **Zephaniah 3.17:** “The LORD your God is with you, he is mighty to save. He will take great delight in you, he will quiet you with his love, he will rejoice over you with singing.” Look up and read all the verses on joy and rejoicing.

4.2. Admit that you cannot have joy apart from Christ and the work of the Holy Spirit

Confess the sins of settling for the counterfeit of joy and of attempting to produce joy in your own strength. Admit that true joy is a gift of grace.

4.3. Pray to the God of joy

In God’s presence is fullness of joy; therefore, those who would stalk joy must passionately pursue the presence of God. When you are tempted to despair, pray. When you are overwhelmed by storms, pray. “Ask,” Jesus says in John 16, “and you will receive and your joy will be full.”

4.4. Believe that those who know Christ can do his will

Some of us lack joy simply because we are unwilling to be joyful. Our despair is a tool we use against God and others to give us a reason to rebel and an excuse for disobedience. Jesus commands joy; we can obey.

John 15.10: “If you keep My commandments, you will abide in My love, just as I have kept My Father's commandments and abide in His love. These things I have spoken to you, that My joy may remain in you, and that your joy may be full.”

The joy of Christ is the joy of obedience to the Father. Will you believe Jesus when he says that we can do the Father’s will and we can delight to do so.

4.5. Act in faith, taking up the cross of joy

Charles Ross, pastor in the late 1800’s: “The tears which you shed are themselves the seed which brings the harvest of joy.” May sound crazy, but you cannot both avoid suffering and experience joy in this life.

We have already seen Matthew 5.11-12. Consider **1Peter 4.12-13**: “Do not think it strange concerning the fiery trial which is to try you, as though some strange thing happened to you; but rejoice to the extent that you partake of Christ's sufferings, that when His glory is revealed, you may also be glad with exceeding joy.” **Romans 5.3**: “We also rejoice in our sufferings...” **Acts 5.41**: “The apostles left the Sanhedrin, rejoicing because they had been counted worthy of suffering disgrace for the Name.” **1Thessalonians 1.6**: “You became imitators of us and of the Lord; in spite of severe suffering, you welcomed the message with the joy given by the Holy Spirit.” **2Timothy 1.8**: “Join with me in suffering for the gospel.”

Do you want joy? Be sure of this: *joy eludes us while we avoid suffering for the Gospel of Jesus Christ.*

4.6. Thank God for the joy given (and for the joy withheld)

God does not seem to grant every person the same amount of joy. Some people’s life-preserver of joy enables them to walk on water; others struggle to keep their heads afloat. While constantly working through these six steps, faith trusts God to do what is best and is thankful for joy given and joy withheld. Will you thank God for his perfect provision?

5. Conclusion

Blaise Pascal: “All men seek happiness. This is without exception. Whatever different means they employ, they all tend to this end. The cause of some going to war, and of others avoiding it, is the same desire in both, attended with different views. The will never takes the least step but to this object. This is the motive of every action of every man, even of those who hang themselves.”

Pascal was noting a truth that is written large across the Bible: all of us are seeking joy. The question is whether we will seek Biblical joy by God-honoring means, or whether we will reject the joy for which our souls so long in favor of the fleeting pleasures available to those who place their hope in this world. Which will be your passion?

You think about that. Amen.