

## Cultivating Joy

I had trouble deciding whether to begin this lesson with an anecdote or confession. If transparency is one goal of desperate men, then let it be the latter. My confession is simple. *Joy* is the fruit of the Spirit mentioned second only to *love* in the Apostle Paul's list (Ephesians 5). Yet there are periods in my life when that bloom not only withers, but the fruit falls from the tree only to rot on the ground. I find the absence of joy often produces a disposition more like bitter lemon than the sweet taste of grace.

If this struggle is also yours perhaps, like me, you will find both conviction and encouragement from my observations of the evidence of real joy in some of the men whose lives grace mine. They prominently demonstrate this fruit. Here are three examples:

- 1) *Prisoner. It is amazing to witness joy in the life of a man in prison who found freedom in Christ despite the bars that constrain him. In prison, men have no control over any area of their lives. Men of joy give control of their lives to the Lord and trust in His will and ways.*
- 2) *Addict. Their struggle is day to day, at times hour by hour. Yet over the years, I have been with many men in programs at the Mission who found true joy on their journey to sobriety or release from the chains of other addictions. While addiction remains, the joy of the Lord becomes their strength.*
- 3) *Suffering Friend. I am amazed and inspired by my friend, Greg Murtha, whose joy shines, despite sixty plus chemo treatments for cancer. He also recently survived a heart attack. He displays vivid evidence of the presence of Holy Spirit reflecting the joy of our Lord Jesus Who endured both suffering and shame on the Cross for you and me.*

The Holy Spirit recently brought to mind a very sobering thought – not new, but a pointed reminder. The **absence of joy** in the life of professing Christians makes us unattractive to the world. If lost people are to be drawn to Christ in me and you, the presence or absence of the joy of the Lord exhibited in our spirits will attract or repel. I find that very disconcerting. What's the remedy? Learning how to **cultivate joy**.

To do so, we must dig deep to get to root(s) of the problem. Doubtful this lesson will expose you to much, if anything, new. But the Holy Spirit has instruction for us that will help plow through **hard crust** built up on our hearts and in our minds over time. Only then can He replace it with **fertile soil** capable of bearing this much needed fruit – evidence of the presence of the Holy Spirit actively working in our lives.

First let's define *joy* in biblical terms and differentiate it from *happiness*. There is nothing wrong with being happy. It is a great emotional place to be. We love being happy, seeing our wives and children happy, and being around happy people. But happiness comes and goes like any emotion. It is almost comical to watch little children move from belly laughter to sobbing tears in seconds. Perhaps the Lord views some of our emotional mood swings in much the same way.

Now consider *joy*. Joy begins as a seed deeply planted in the heart and mind of the believer whose focus becomes experiencing the presence of the Lord in his life. The Bible instructs us to "*seek the Lord with all of our hearts*" (Deuteronomy 4:29, Jeremiah 29:13). God promised He will be found by such seekers (Jeremiah 29: 14). David penned one of my favorite verses in Psalm 16. "*...in Your presence is fullness of joy.*"

That is what we want "*fullness of joy*". That is **sustainable joy**, not temporary happiness based on favorable circumstances. Well-rooted joy has staying power in the face of that which would "steal, kill, or destroy" it in our lives. Joy becomes a condition of the heart and state of mind. While it will not be ever-present, joy leaves behind roots that may be found during seasons of pain and suffering (unhappiness) even if we have to dig deep to find them.

Consider two examples that differentiate joy and happiness.

- Marriage. My wife is a source of joy in my life – a gift from the Lord. She makes me happy...sometimes. At other times, she makes me mad. My happiness with her is gone. Believe it or not, she has suggested I do the same to her!
- Dad. My kids are a great source of joy in my life – again gifts from the Lord. During the years of raising them, they made me both happy and sad, proud and crazy, angry and disappointed.

Yet those negative emotions based on behaviors did not rob the joy of the fact that my wife and kids are gifts from the Lord. I am blessed by having them in my lives. But make no mistake about it, there are times those emotions push joy down so deeply it disappears from sight. Or the hurt and anguish are so strong, joy falls completely off the tree. When that happens, at some point during the healing and restoration process, **joy must be re-cultivated**. There is nothing easy about that process. It is hard work and requires digging until we expose those things that attack the roots and kill our joy.

**Joy Killers.** I suggest three. Satan. Circumstances. Self.

- Satan. Biblical Christians absolutely believe in the presence of evil in our world including the invisible enemies about which Jesus often spoke. Satanic-demonic forces have one mission this side of Hell. Quoting the words of Jesus,

*"The thief (reference to Satan) comes only to **steal, kill, and destroy.**"* (John 10:10, NASB)

Peter, with Jesus when He spoke those words, repeated the warning for Christians. (1 Peter 5: 8, NIV)

*"...Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to **devour.**"*

Stealing, killing, destroying, and devouring the joy of Christians sit high on the list because of the impact joy has on our testimony before others, especially those who do not believe.

- Circumstances. Jesus called them "the cares of this world". (Mark 4: 19) Some like to blame everything on the devil. The truth is many untoward circumstances are simply the results of bad decisions. And we have to live with the consequences. We are especially annoyed if they are caused by someone else. That triggers the "blame game". In that passage of Scripture, Jesus was speaking on the subject of seeds scattered among thorns that choke out any growth so that no fruit can be produced. Thorns provide a great analogy of a "joyless" Christian because our demeanor often becomes sharp and prickly. When bad circumstances produce rotten attitudes, joy cannot grow.
- Self. Killing our own joy is an inane concept on the surface, but we are completely capable of executing it – literally! Paul wrote to his protégé, Timothy, a list of what people would look like and their behaviors as we spiral down to the "last days". He referred to some as "lovers of self" (2 Timothy 3:2). Isn't it interesting today that one of the greatest uses of technology is taking and posting "selfies"? Many people today are obsessed with themselves—posting everything they do and everywhere they go, yet they have no joy in their lives. The love of self smothers it.

As we begin to bring closure to this lesson, I want to offer a warning of sorts. **Biblical joy looks so different from that which the world holds out, it may be unrecognizable—even to Christians.** To help bring the Truth to light, let's consider three examples and expressions of genuine joy straight out of the Bible. This review will also shed more light on the differences between biblical joy and happiness.

## Understanding & Cultivating Biblical Joy – Three examples the world longs to see in Christians

1. The Joy of the Apostle Paul. Paul wrote the Philippian epistle, often referred to as the “Joy Letter”, while he was in prison. From the book of Acts to his final letter to the young preacher, Timothy, we read of his “beatings and imprisonments” for Christ’s sake. Yet in the midst of his suffering, and right up until his death, Paul continued to talk about the joy of the Lord and his joy in the Lord.

Paul “prayed with joy” from his prison cell for the young Christians and early churches. He also found joy in the like-mindedness of the church he worked so tirelessly to help build and sustain. The church today needs more pastors and Christians who possess and replicate the kind of joy Paul possessed or, perhaps better said, the kind of joy that possessed him.

The Apostle Paul, full of joy, was killed for his unwavering defense of the Gospel of Christ. Extra-biblical sources suggest he was beheaded during the terror reign of Nero.

2. The Joy of James (the brother of Jesus - not the disciple.) James, a son of Mary and Joseph, was raised in the same home with Jesus. Hard to imagine what that was like...living with a perfect brother. (Of course, my sisters could just about say the same!) We know little of James until he became a leader of the early church along with Peter. James’ legacy is a short, powerful letter that challenges Christians to let our works demonstrate our faith and salvation.

James began his letter in a strange way. He referred to himself as a “servant of the Lord Jesus Christ”, not *the brother of Jesus*. He said, “Count it all joy, brothers, when you encounter various trials ...” (James 1: 2). Joy = trials of our faith. That’s radical thinking. He only goes deeper from there.

Christians today (and I am chief among them at times) are known to whine with the ~~best~~ worst of people when things do not go our way. The Israelites did this for forty years as they wandered around in the desert. Despite their repeated deliverances from every enemy and issue imaginable, the Israelites often questioned God and whined about His provision.

James clearly explained that true joy from the Holy Spirit endures hardship and trials and remains faithful to Him Who saved us. Historians hold that James was either stoned to death or thrown from a temple tower. Not exactly the *joyful* ending we had in mind for the brother of Jesus.

3. The Joy of Jesus. The sinless, blameless Son of God, died the most horrible death ever recorded with joy in His heart. One commentator called it “the joy of His accomplished purpose.” We know from Scripture, Jesus was not happy during that gruesome process. Hard to be happy when you are being beaten, publicly humiliated, and suffocating—nailed to a cross. All for my sin; His life laid down with joy in the thought that my miserable life was worth saving. How do we process that?

There is only one response: let our absolute love and devotion to Christ produce the fruit of joy in our lives. The Apostle Peter called it “joy inexpressible” (1 Peter 1: 8). We must allow the Holy Spirit to produce that kind of joy in us from a fertile mind and well-cultivated heart. Then we can walk before a desperate world that watches us hoping to catch a glimpse of this Jesus of Whom we readily speak but too infrequently imitate.

My dear brothers, only that kind of joy is real, sustainable, and will draw others to the *winsomeness* of Christ in you and me. I invite you to get your shovel and pickax and let the digging begin.

*Walter*

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