

Cultivating Joy in the Midst of Manufactured Desire

Galatians 5:22-23; Philippians 4:4-13

Pastor Tom

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We just couldn't find the perfect conditions. This past summer our family tried to enjoy a perfect beach day. I think our family is pretty typical in expectations. You look for water that's bearable to swim in, sand, sun and fun. We first hoped for some beach time in Prince Edward Island. Islands have lots of beaches after all. We discovered that PEI has beautiful beaches. However, two of the four factors we hoped for were missing. It was around 16 celcius for the whole time of our visit. There was little or no sun most days. And the water was freezing. Strong winds came in off the ocean. So though we walked along the beach and got some nice pictures, we didn't experience perfect conditions for a beach day.

But then we went to Southern Ontario. And on one of our days there, we went to the Burlington Beach on Lake Ontario. Now we already knew that two or maybe even three of the factors were already met before we got to the beach. It was warm out. The sun shone. There was sand and the water was bearable to swim in. It looked like a perfect beach day. But just after settling down to our spot on the beach, Lori said, "I smell something weird," she said. I smelled it too. But not wanting to damage our sought after perfect beach conditions, I thought the best strategy was denial. "No, I don't smell anything." And when the wind changed direction, I didn't smell anything. But when the breeze shifted our way, the smell returned. Lori shared that she would be ready to go back to Grandmas anytime. We didn't know if it was Lake Ontario itself or a sewage treatment plant. But I continued to deny the reality of the smell.

So we tried to enjoy ourselves. But soon after settling on the beach, these larger black flies started to land on us. And they weren't like our flies here that just buzz around to annoy you. They bit. So we would get our spot on our towel and try to settle in for a few moments until we felt another pinch on a leg or arm. And sometimes, you literally had to constantly shoo the flies away. Now others joined Lori in suggesting it might be time to go. But it was supposed to be our perfect beach day. I toughed it out for a few more minutes until the breeze brought the smell back at the same time the flies started biting. "Okay, let's go then." And everyone jumped up to leave.

So though we did go to a couple of beaches, we didn't experience perfect beach days. The conditions weren't quite right. We didn't have the right temperature, weather, water, odor or insect control. Now what do all those factors have in common? They were beyond our control. If our joy depended on those factors lining up, we couldn't experience joy on those days.

Yet isn't that how some people live their lives today? Might some of you live like that? Maybe your happiness and joy depends on life going well. It's understandable why we may choose to live like this. It is a lot easier to be happy and joyful in pleasant circumstances. But is joy only possible when life goes well? We all face hard things in our lives. We experience sickness, disappointment and challenging relationships. Dreams don't work out like we hoped. Some event or experience doesn't deliver what was promised. Some of you carry a constant burden. So if joy depends on life going like we want it to, we will seldom experience it.

But what if **Joy is possible regardless of circumstance**? I'm not talking about putting on a happy face to mask the sorrow in our hearts or socializing with a smile even though we're going through a dark valley. Nor am I minimizing the realities of depression, anxiety, PTSD, pain and loss. But I am talking about the possibility of a deep gladness in our hearts regardless of what's going on around us. Is such a thing possible? That's what we're going to explore today as we continue our journey through the Fruit of the Spirit.

Last week, we looked at the first fruit of love. We learned that Biblical love focuses on others. God demonstrated this love to us especially through Jesus going to the cross. God calls us to be people who love Him and others. We saw ways in which our dominant culture can hinder such other focused love especially in its push for us to offer a self-focused or self-interested love. We don't create other focused love or resolve to love like this in our own strength. We need to remain connected to Christ the vine, for the Holy Spirit to grow this fruit in us.

Today we're going to continue our pattern of unpacking this fruit of the Spirit. First what is Biblical joy? What obstacles does our dominant culture present that can steal our hearts away from Biblical joy? Finally, we'll look at some practices that help cultivate our hearts in preparation for the Spirit's fruit of joy to grow in us.

So let's review the fruit of the Spirit passage and then another passage that gets us thinking more about joy. Galatians 5:22-23 and Philippians 4:4-13.

Galatians 5:22-23 (ESV)

But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. Against such things there is no law.

Philippians 4:4-13 (ESV)

⁴Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, rejoice. ⁵Let your reasonableness be known to everyone. The Lord is at hand; ⁶do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your

requests be made known to God.⁷ And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

⁸Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence, if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things.⁹ What you have learned and received and heard and seen in me—practice these things, and the God of peace will be with you.

¹⁰I rejoiced in the Lord greatly that now at length you have revived your concern for me. You were indeed concerned for me, but you had no opportunity. ¹¹Not that I am speaking of being in need, for I have learned in whatever situation I am to be content. ¹²I know how to be brought low, and I know how to abound. In any and every circumstance, I have learned the secret of facing plenty and hunger, abundance and need. ¹³I can do all things through him who strengthens me.

How do we prepare our hearts for the Holy Spirit's fruit of Joy?

First, we need to **Understand Biblical Joy**. In English we use the same word for the state, source and expression of joy. So if we say "playing in the orchestra brings me such joy," we're talking about a state of joy. "My children give me such joy," expresses a source of joy. And if we say "When I finally saw her again, I jumped for joy," that expresses the experience of joy.

But what is joy? A dictionary defines joy as happiness; delight; pleasure and bliss. Joy is feelings of great happiness or pleasure. So if that's what Paul means by the fruit of the Spirit joy, he's not talking about anything unique.

But the Bible's joy is much deeper. Phil Kenneson, the author of the book that informs some of this series states **Joy is deep gladness that God is present with us.**¹ Now think about how dramatically this changes our perspective on joy. If our joy depends on something external like warm water, sand, sun and fun, we can only experience joy when we get what we want or the conditions line up. But deep gladness that God is present can happen when I don't have the sun and warm water. Such joy can be present when life does not go well and we don't get what we want. This kind of joy may not even include happiness or laughing. Yet it is a settled contentment that God is always present with us.

But we have to know this God and His character to gain some of this deep gladness in His presence. It helps to recognize that **God Himself is joyful**. If you could see God's face, what kind of expression do you think He has today as He looks at the world right now? What might it look like if His eyes were turned on you?

¹ Phil Kenneson, *Life on the Vine: Cultivating the Fruit of the Spirit in Christian Community*, IVP, Downer's Grove, Ill., 1999, 62.

Did you ever think of God smiling? John Piper writes this: *God has the right and power and wisdom to do whatever makes him happy. None of his purposes can be frustrated. Therefore, he is never deficient or needy. He is never gloomy or discouraged. He is always full and overflowing energetic for the sake of his people who seek their happiness in him.*² Isaiah 62:5 states “As the bridegroom rejoices over the bride, so shall your God rejoice over you.” In Isaiah 65, God talks about the coming creation of the new heavens and new earth.

“For behold, I create new heavens
and a new earth,
and the former things shall not be remembered
or come into mind.
¹⁸ But be glad and rejoice forever
in that which I create;
for behold, I create Jerusalem to be a joy,
and her people to be a gladness.
¹⁹ I will rejoice in Jerusalem
and be glad in my people;
no more shall be heard in it the sound of weeping
and the cry of distress. (Isaiah 65:17-19)

But perhaps one of the clearest and most powerful pictures of God’s joy is found in the parable of the prodigal son in Luke 15. A son asks his father for his inheritance. He leaves the family and wastes it on wild living. He ends up feeding pigs and longs to eat what the pigs eat. He comes to his senses and determines to go home to his father. He will confess his sin and beg to be accepted as one of his father’s slaves.

But then Jesus describes what happens in Luke 15:20-24

²⁰ And he arose and came to his father. But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and felt compassion, and ran and embraced him and kissed him. ²¹ And the son said to him, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son.’ ²² But the father said to his servants, ‘Bring quickly the best robe, and put it on him, and put a ring on his hand, and shoes on his feet.’ ²³ And bring the fattened calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate. ²⁴ For this my son was dead, and is alive again; he was lost, and is found.’ And they began to celebrate.

God is the father in this parable. He rejoices deeply at the return of his son. He commands a celebration because the lost has been found. God rejoices when those who are estranged return to him.

But how is it possible for God to be joyful with all the suffering in the world? And for that matter how can we really experience joy in suffering? Well it is possible for God because He has the back and front view of the goings on in

² John Piper, *Desiring God*, Multnomah, Oregon, 1996, 34.

this world. In the back perspective, God experiences grief and anger at sin and pain. But from the front perspective, God sees evil in relation to His greater purposes. He can see how this narrower event will serve a greater plan. It's like we see reality from the back side of a tapestry where all the threads and colors go this way and that in seeming chaos. But God sees the completed beautiful side of the tapestry which will one day see in eternity.

But God is not the only one who can actually be joyful in the midst of suffering. We can experience this. Our world tells us that joy is the absence of something undesirable such as pain, suffering or disappointment. But Christian joy is the proper response to the presence of someone desirable – God. Though we may not want God close to us in certain times we want Him very close in difficult times. It is possible to experience both a sorrow & joy. In those times, it is a great comfort to know God is present.

I have told you this before, but I still remember the first few moments after leaving my father's hospital room upon his death. I had this strange somewhat conflicted great sorrow mingled with a relieved joy. Dad was seeing Jesus face to face. Dad had finished the race. God enabled Dad to persevere to the end. Now he was free of all that pain and years of struggling with his back. He is with Christ. So even in that moment of sorrow there was joy – not happiness – but deep and settled gladness in God.

We see examples of joy in suffering throughout the New Testament. Paul and Silas endure a terrible flogging in Philippi. Yet they sing hymns in jail at midnight. Paul praises the Thessalonians for being an example of joyful living despite persecution. Christian joy is bound up with hope – we believe that the pain and suffering we experience in this life, though real, is not the last word on the matter. Our joy looks to God and His work and that He is weaving together His perfect tapestry.

Not only do Christians rejoice in the midst of their suffering but some even rejoiced in the fact of their suffering on account of Christ. In Acts 5:41, the apostles get flogged or whipped for preaching Christ. But later they rejoice that they have been considered worthy to suffer for the name of Jesus. James instructs us to “count it all joy when you encounter trials of many kinds because the testing of our faith produces steadfastness”. Peter says “Don't be surprised at the fiery trial when it comes upon you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you. But rejoice that as you share in Christ's sufferings, that you may also rejoice and be glad when his glory is revealed.

Now if we're not careful, this can almost sound like masochism – a command to enjoy pain. Christians in the New Testament did not rejoice that they experienced pain and somehow loved the pain so much. They rejoiced in what was accomplished through the suffering – whether the advance of God's kingdom or the growing fruit in their own lives. Sometimes God produces sweet fruit in His people through their sufferings and that's worth rejoicing over.

Joni Earekson Tada tells the story of a time when she and her husband visited a friend name Tim. He grew several rare varieties of grapes on the hillside beside his house. Joni was surprised that Tim planted these vines along a steep and rocky portion of the hill. So Joni asked "Why didn't you plant the vines at the base of the hill? The soil certainly looks a lot better – and there's more sun."

Tim smiled. "There's a rule you need to remember when it comes to growing these special varieties of grapes. When you feed them with lots of nutrients and fertilizer, the vine produces massive bushes of leaves and plant. But it grows sparse and poor fruit. Oh make no mistake," he laughed. "The plant loves lots of fertilizer. But it invests all those nutrients in growing lush, dark, beautiful leaves. And when the vine has finished doing that, it has very little energy left to produce fruit. It certainly looks like a beautiful vine. But that's it. It just looks good."

How then do you get good grapes? As Tim explained it, you have to make sure the grapevine struggles! You plant it in rocky, flinty soil, or you girdle the vine by wrapping wires around the cordons, forcing the plant to struggle as it draws nutrients from its roots. This causes the distressed vine to divert most of its prized hard won nutrients into the fruit, instead of the leaves. The result of these trials and tribulations is the sweetest fruit possible.

Then Joni concludes – "So . . . maybe the rocky soil and steep inclines in your life aren't so bad after all. The trials and struggles, disappointments and setbacks you face, this 'girdling' that presses you in from all sides . . . is a bruising of blessing. And you won't bear a crop without it." I have watched people go through difficult times where they started a prideful, independence from God one-defiant. God used the difficulties to soften them, and grow in them humility.

So Biblical Joy is unlike ordinary joy. It is deep gladness in God's presence with us. God Himself is joyful and can experience joy. It is possible to experience joy even in the midst of suffering because of God's presence and purposes.

But we live in a culture that does not encourage this kind of joy. How does the dominant culture do this? **It has enormous power to form our desires and affections away from God.** Where did we learn to desire what we desire?

Where did we learn what to eat or what to look like or what to drive? Why are you wearing the clothes you're wearing today? Might it be because our culture tells us what looks good and what's in fashion. Could it be that our culture has the power to shape our desires and affection ?

It devotes enormous time and money to manufacture our desires. At least a trillion dollars a year is spent on advertising. It plays on and helps create our contemporary confusion and anxiety about who we are and whether we have worth. So we are encouraged and invited to consume a product and the image and values that come with it. One of the most successful marketers of this strategy is Apple. They have projected their products as cutting edge and coolest tech devices out there. And anyone who owns one takes on the image of cool and cutting edge. So even though Apple products have been more expensive, many buy them because of the image that comes with them.

It can influence us to cultivate an insatiable desire for the new, improved, bigger and more. Kenneson writes "One of the dominant culture's deepest prejudices is that new is always better than old. The past should be viewed with suspicion. Traditional thinking obstructs individual self-rule, freedom and progress.

We are also convinced that if we want to be happy, our lives need to be filled with an endless stream of new and exciting experiences. So to spend one's life doing the same things is boring and a ticket to unhappiness. We always need something new and exciting. Yet the very nature of such a search guarantees one can never be satisfied: Happy for a while – need something new. Happy for a while – need something new. People can translate that to relationships, cars, churches, phones and schools and jobs.

We're told we not only need new stuff and new experiences. We also need more stuff. We need bigger stuff. And if something is bigger then it's automatically better. Now think about how all of this might impact our view of the church. If we value the new above the old, we can doubt the worth of 2000 year old traditions. We can conclude that everything must be new and different in the church. We must also keep changing things so people aren't bored. Certainly, we need to be open to new expressions of the faith. In the past, there was little or no room for anything new. But it seems the pendulum has swung to other side where only the new is considered valuable. But we must discern ask what makes this legitimate? Just because it's new? All of this creates discontent with what we have, or who we are. Joy depends on externals – new, bigger, more...

So we've seen a little about Biblical Joy. We've seen some of the hindrances to joy. What practices can help us prepare our hearts for joy?

We can **Practice rejoicing in God's identity and works**. Sometimes, we allow our problems to so cloud our minds that we forget about God. We can demonstrate this in the way we pray. Dear God – thank you for this day – Now about all my problems –what are you doing to do about them God? But what if we started our prayers focusing on God's greatness and power?

Tim Keller tells of a time he preached on the Lord's Prayer. During the message he made a rather offhand comment that since adoration or praise comes before asking God for daily bread, we need to spend time thanking and praising God for who he is before we get to our prayer list of needs. One woman in his congregation took this to heart and a couple of weeks later came and related what a difference that advice had made. "Before," she said, "I would run right to my prayer list and the more I went through all the problems and needs, the more anxious and burdened I would get. Now I've started spending time thinking about how good and wise he is and how many prayers he's answered of mine in the past. And when I get to my own needs – now I find I can put them in his hands and feel the burden coming off me rather than on me."³

We can also practice **nurturing contentment** in our lives. The passage from Philippians we read earlier talks about this. Paul first commends the Philippians for renewing their concern for him. He was in some sort of need and they had sent him a gift. But he goes on to describe how he has learned to be content whatever the circumstances – whether living with plenty or nothing – whether things were going well or going poorly. In fact, he wrote the letter from prison. But he learned contentment by His focus on Christ. "I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me." Later he says my God shall supply all your needs according to His riches in glory. Paul was able to experience that deep gladness because of God's presence with Him even while in prison. Our culture encourages and thrives on discontent which robs us of joy. But contentment can provide fertile ground for growing the fruit of joy.

Another way to prepare our hearts is to **pay attention to little creatures**. What often happens when we see a baby? We smile. Why? There is something enjoyable and delightful about such a little one. Why do we like puppies and kittens and baby animals? The newness of their lives brings some sort of joy out of us. These are all creations of

³ Tim Keller, *Prayer: Experiencing Awe and Intimacy with God*, Dutton, New York, 2014, 190

God. Simply by spending time watching and marveling at these little creatures, we can find our hearts filling up with joy at this newness and curiosity in life.

Begin your day with thanksgiving. What thoughts enter your mind when you begin your day? I find that sometimes the problems or challenges of the day ahead immediately dominate my thinking as I awaken. So I need to intentionally challenge that perspective before today's challenges dominate my mood. So I have a Bible on our bathroom counter open to the book of Psalms. As I'm waking up and starting to brush my teeth, I read a short passage of Psalms asking the Lord to point out one aspect of His character or one work that He has done. Then I think about that and repeat that through much of my getting ready time. I find that helps me look at the day through the lens of something about God. Then the challenges and problems look a little different with God as part of the equation.

Since we're focusing on community we need to **encourage one another to rejoice**. Rejoice with those who rejoice. Point out evidence of God's work in another person's life.

Now I hope some of these will help you think about how you can prepare your heart for the Spirit's fruit of joy. But for today, I invite you to think about the level of joy – deep joy in your life. What level would you say you've been living at over the last while? If it's pretty low, is that because of something in your life that's bringing you down? An external factor that you can't change and you believe you can't experience joy until it changes? If so, will you bring that to the Lord now and share with Him your heart? But will you also take some time to rest in the deep comfort of His presence with you no matter what happens with that situation or concern? This is not about minimizing problems or denying the reality of suffering. But it is about discovering God's never departing presence and comfort no matter what you face right now. So will you come to God and pray quietly about your joy and life? Then in a few moments I will pray on behalf of all of us to discover more of this deeper joy is possible in any circumstance because of God.