

The Fruit of the Spirit: Joy

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Galatians 5:16-26; Philippians 4:4-7

05 29 2011 Sam Jones Memorial UMC

Fruit of the Spirit Series

Today we are continuing our summer worship series entitled **The Fruit of the Spirit**. Galatians 5:22-23 describes nine attributes of the Christian disciple: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. When we abide in a vital relationship with God, the “*fruit of the Spirit*” grows naturally in our lives.

Last week we saw how living in the Holy Spirit leads to **love** of God and neighbor. This morning we explore how the Spirit produces **joy** in our lives.

Scripture: Philippians 4:4-7

Introduction

On December 25, 2007, **Sammy McGee Burch** joined our home. The bundle of joy arrived on Christmas morning with a red bow around his neck. When our children saw the Yorkshire Terrier puppy, it was love at first sight. He immediately became a part of the family—the kind of sibling both my son and daughter always WISHED they had!

I never wanted an inside dog, but I must confess that Sam stole my heart. I have become one of those old men who ride around town with a dog sitting in their lap!

When I return home at the end of the day, Sam greets me at the door like royalty. He jumps, spins, twirls, turns, yips, and barks. Then he wants to cover my face with slobbery, doggie kisses. He is a portrait of pure, unabashed **joy**.

Happiness Versus Joy

My dog’s antics unleashed my imagination and gave me “paws” for thought. Get it—paws?!? ☺ **Joy** is a part of our birthright as God’s children. Our Lord created us to be a joy-filled people. However, many Christians find that joyfulness is a slippery substance to gain and maintain in their spiritual lives. And if you didn’t just laugh at my two dog puns, then this is a sign that you are in serious need of a joy fill-up!

Part of the problem is that we don’t always understand the true nature of joy. We tend to confuse joy with **happiness**. Worldly society preaches the gospel of happiness; and our culture promotes happiness through **materialism**. Madison Avenue advertisements thrive on this premise. The promise at the heart of every promotion is that the product will make the consumer feel happy and fulfilled.

Eat at this fast food restaurant—there’s a reason that McDonald’s calls them *Happy Meals!* Drink that soft drink. Drive this car. Sport that tennis shoe. Smoke this cigarette. Wear that label. Buy this TV. Own that house. Follow this advice. Watch that show. Buy this book. Hear that music. THEN you will be happy.

Eventually we all discover the problem to this approach. We’re looking for something that this world was never designed to provide. Pleasure is a fleeting feeling.

Happiness doesn't last long. So life becomes an endless search for the next pleasurable thing that will make us happy . . . for a while. We experience *The Law of Diminishing Returns*. It takes more and more to satisfy less and less.

Happiness is dependent upon **external circumstances** that quickly change. Ultimately, it is beyond our control. It comes and goes like THAT. Show me someone who is always happy and I will show you someone out of touch with reality!

We KNOW this but spend our lives chasing happiness any way. However, the pursuit of happiness is ultimately a losing proposition. The world was never created to make us happy. And if this is what we expect of life, then we will be sadly disappointed.

In fact, I'm not even convinced that God is concerned about our happiness. Stay with me on this point for a moment! I challenge you to search the Bible and find a single verse that promises God's people will always be happy in life. Our Heavenly Father's goal is not to make us temporarily happy. Our Lord seeks to raise us up to become the men and women we were created to be.

If our goal in life is happiness and pleasure, then we are aiming too low. We have settled for the earthly rather than the heavenly. The Lord has something much better in store for those who seek God's will, Word, and way in their lives.

The Joy of the Lord

Our heavenly Father does not promise his children happiness; instead, God gives us the much greater gift of **joy**. Happiness is passing; joy is lasting. Happiness is temporal, joy is eternal. Happiness is dependent upon external circumstances; joy is based upon an internal relationship. Happiness is the result of human effort; joy is the outgrowth of divine grace.

So what is the basis of this divine joy in our lives? Recall the story from Luke 10 when Jesus sent 72 disciples out into the surrounding countryside to proclaim the gospel. They returned with reports of miracles, healings, and exorcisms. It was a spiritual mountain top in their lives as God's power was revealed.

However, Jesus said to them: "*Do not rejoice that the spirits submit to you, but rejoice that your names are written in heaven!*" (Luke 10:20) Ultimately, Christian joy is based upon **our relationship with Jesus Christ as our Lord and Savior**.

Take a step back and think about this for a moment. Salvation comes by God's grace through human faith—and our very act of faith also occurs by God's grace. When we accept what God has done on our behalf at the cross and empty tomb, we receive the forgiveness of sins and the promise of life everlasting. How can we NOT be joyful?

Brian Wren wrote the hymn, *I Come with Joy*. The first stanza declares: "*I come with joy to meet my Lord, forgiven, loved, and free, in awe and wonder to recall his life laid down for me.*"

This is the source, the bedrock, and the foundation of our joy in this world. It is a joy that the world can neither give nor take away. Jesus told his disciples: "*I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete.*" (John 15:11)

In Psalm 51:12, David prayed: "*Restore to me the joy of your salvation, and grant me a willing spirit, to sustain me.*" We echo David's prayer that the Holy Spirit would restore in us a sense of joy of our salvation.

Rejoice in the Lord at All Times

Those who walk in the Spirit cultivate the gift of joy based upon our relationship with God. We are born-again, children of the king, sons and the daughters of the Master of Everything! Rejoice! Unlike happiness that is dependent upon outer circumstances, joy is a continual state of grace dependent upon an inner relationship. The Bible promises that Christians who abide in Christ can experience joy at **all times**.

We rejoice in the **good times**, recognizing the divine blessings in our lives. We recognize that God is good—all the time; and all the time, God is good! The great hymn writer, Isaac Watts, declared: “*Come ye that love the Lord, and let your joys be known!*”

When the worship team brain-stormed about this sermon, one person said, “I almost always associate joy with **thankfulness**.” This is a great observation. The recognition of all that God has done in our lives is a wonderful entrée into joyfulness.

When folk ask me about serving at Sam Jones, I often answer, “I am blessed—and I know it.” Both components are critical elements of joy. Psalm 16:11: “*You have made known to me the path of life; you will fill me with joy in your presence, with eternal pleasures at your right hand.*”

It is relatively easy to feel joyful in the good times. However, God also promises that his joy can also sustain us in the **bad times**. For extra credit, I encourage you to read Paul’s letter to the **Philippians**. The epistle is saturated with joy. Time and again the apostle calls God’s people to rejoice regardless of the circumstances.

Paul’s words are even more striking when you recall that he was sitting in a Roman prison cell for the Christian faith. Eventually Paul’s faithfulness would lead to his execution by the Roman authorities. And still he could write: “*Rejoice in the Lord, always. I will say it again: Rejoice!*” (Philippians 4:4) Beth Moore wrote:

Through his trials Paul learned something I believe God desires for all believers to learn: the presence, purpose, and power of God is best discovered through difficulty. How encouraging to recognize that Paul did not discover the strength to leave his circumstances; he discovered the strength to stay! (Living Beyond Yourself, pp. 79-30)

This was why James could write:

Consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance. Perseverance must finish its work SO THAT you may be mature and complete, no lacking anything. (James 1:2-4)

Surprised by Joy

Christians can experience heartfelt joy in every season of life. However, we must take care that we are not so bound by the past or worried about the future that we miss God’s present joy in the here and now.

As Matthew Broderick put it in the movie, *Ferris Bueller*: “Life moves pretty fast. If you don’t stop and look around once in a while, you could miss it!” Jason Lehman wrote a haunting poem which expresses this same thought in a different way:

*It was spring. But it was summer I wanted,
The warm days, and the great outdoors.
It was summer. But it was Fall I wanted,
The colorful leaves, and the cool, dry air.
It was Fall. But it was winter I wanted,
The beautiful snow, and the joy of the holiday season.
It was winter. But it was spring I wanted,
The warmth, and the blossoming of nature.
I was a child. But it was adulthood I wanted,
The freedom, and the respect.
I was twenty. But it was thirty I wanted
To be mature, and sophisticated.
I was middle-aged. But it was twenty I wanted,
The youth, and the free spirit.
I was retired. But it was middle-age I wanted,
The presence of mind without limitations.
My life was over. But I never got what I wanted.*

The words are all the more striking when you know that Jason Lehman wrote the poem when he was 14 years old. The title of the poem is *Present Tense*.

Those who walk by the Spirit discover God’s joy in the **present tense**. We are oftentimes **surprised by joy** in the most unexpected ways. Beth Moore talks about “*the joy of discovery*” (p. 79) when we encounter the divine in our human existence.

Those who attended the May *Business by the Book* heard Phil Schroeder talk about the “**Easter Eggs**” that film makers often put in their movies. Like Easter Eggs hidden for children to find, the movies often contain small surprises that only the most observant will discover.

Our world is filled with Easter eggs of God’s grace and presence. For those with eyes to see and ears to hear, the Lord is all about us. Last year I talked about George Strait’s song entitled *I Saw God Today*. The chorus says:

*I've been to church, I've read the book,
I know He's there, But I don't look,
near as often as I should,
His fingerprints are everywhere,
I just slow down to stop and stare,
open my eyes and then I swear,
I saw God Today.*

Oftentimes we discover God’s Easter eggs in the lives of **others** around us. We are God’s gifts to one another. We are called to rejoice in God’s saints. Granted, we may

have to search harder in some people's lives than others. However, there's an old saying: "Some people bring joy wherever they go. Other people bring joy whenever they go." Either way, there's joy to be found!

Conclusion

Some of us grew up singing the old gospel hymn:

*I've got a river of life flowing out of me!
Makes the lame to walk, and the blind to see.
Opens prison doors, sets the captives free!
I've got a river of life flowing out of me!
Spring up, O well, within my soul!
Spring up, O well, and make me whole!
Spring up, O well, and give to me
That life abundantly.*

Joy is like an **artesian well** which naturally bubbles to the surface because of the positive pressure below. It simply cannot be contained as it overflows in our lives.

Those who live, walk, and abide in the Spirit—daily, constantly, and continually—discover God's joy in their lives. This IS the day the Lord has made, let us rejoice and be glad in it! Amen.