

The Fruit of the Spirit: Joy

In Galatians 5 Paul described the fruit of the Spirit in this way:

22 But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, 23 gentleness, self-control . . .

Last week Brian taught on love. This morning we're going to consider how the Spirit might produce joy in our lives.

Let's begin with working definition of joy. ***Joy is a deep satisfaction in God and His ways.*** A joyful person is someone who finds great satisfaction and fulfillment in who God is and what God does. We can experience this type of satisfaction in many different contexts: we can enjoy God through worship, but also through human relationships, through our work, through using our spiritual gifts, through hobbies (I find great satisfaction in things like woodworking and gardening), through learning (very satisfying to understand some aspect of history, for example). You can enjoy God in many different ways. And you can express this joy in a variety of different ways. Sometimes joy will make a person smile and laugh and shout out loud (e.g., Psalm 32:11). At other times you might express joy quietly and internally (such as when you look at a beautiful sunset). At other times we might cry tears of joy. People with different temperaments experience and express joy in different ways. But however it is expressed and however it is experienced, joy is a deep abiding satisfaction in God and His ways.

Today we are going to consider some Scriptures which stress how the Christian life is supposed to be joy from first to last - not because the Christian life is so fun and easy, but because God is always satisfying. I realize that this sermon (and this topic) may be difficult for you to hear. You may be going through a dark time in your life or you may be suffering in some way. The idea that you ought to be experiencing joy may frustrate you: "Oh great. . . joy is one more thing that I have to feel crummy about."

If I'm describing you, I'd invite you to take a fresh look at joy and listen to the Scriptures in faith. As I mentioned a couple of weeks ago, joy isn't the icing on the cake; joy is the "cake." Joy is our birthright in Christ Jesus. There's a sense in which He became one of us, died on the cross, and rose again so that we would have joy. That being the case, I have to believe that He wants to show you how you can have joy given your temperament, your circumstances, and your past.

We begin with a Scripture that teaches that

We enter into the kingdom out of joy. (Matthew 13:44) This is one of Jesus' shortest parables, but one that communicates something fundamental about the kingdom of heaven. Matthew 13 contains several parables about the kingdom of heaven. These parables describe what is true about the kingdom of heaven and what happens when God reigns in our lives. Listen to verse 44:

44 “The kingdom of heaven is like a treasure hidden in the field, which a man found and hid *again*; and from joy over it he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field.

This short parable puts forth an unlikely but possible scenario. One person or family owns a field which (unbeknownst to them) contained a buried treasure. We aren't told why this was the case, but there are numerous possible reasons. Perhaps the previous owner buried this treasure when an invading army approached, thinking that he would someday return to his land and find the treasure right where he had buried it. But the man never returned and the current owner didn't realize that the treasure even existed.

In Jesus' parable a man is walking through this field and finds this treasure. Instead of just taking it or showing it to the owner of the field, this man buries it again. Jesus says, “and from joy over it he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field.” That might not seem like a very ethical thing to do, but Jesus sometimes told unethical stories if they illustrated a spiritual principle in an especially poignant way. For example, Jesus likened His return to a thief breaking into someone's house (Luke 12:39-40); it will be that unexpected. And so we shouldn't be bothered that Jesus tells this story in which the man re-hides the treasure and then buys the field w/o letting the owners know about the buried treasure.

Jesus said that the prospect of owning this treasure filled the man with such joy that he sold everything he had and bought the field. The prospect of owning that treasure was **that** satisfying. Jesus' comment is that the kingdom of heaven is also **that** satisfying. When your eyes are opened to the reality of the kingdom, you have the same mentality of the man who stumbled across the buried treasure: you realize that living in the kingdom is so satisfying that you will give up everything in order to enter in. When you understand what it would mean to have God as your king, you don't enter into the kingdom out of obligation or out of fear or out of dread. You enter out of joy.

C.S. Lewis entitled his spiritual autobiography “Surprised by Joy” because when he first started investigating Christianity seriously he never expected to find joy. I grew up listening to Billy Joel singing, “I'd rather laugh with the sinners than cry with the saints; sinners are much more fun; only the good die young.” My experience was a lot more like C.S. Lewis' than Billy Joel's. When I started hanging around believers and learning about God at age 20, I found life with God to be infinitely more satisfying than the life I was living. There were no threats or coercions or manipulations needed; I gladly traded in the old life for life in Christ. At the time I didn't know how to describe this; but now I would say that I entered the kingdom of God “out of joy.”

If you have entered the kingdom you may or may not be able to remember that initial joy. For some people that joy comes later, when you recognize what's been gained through Christ. In either case, it's good to realize that **we enter the kingdom of God out of joy** - not out of obligation or boredom or anything else. We enter the kingdom because we realize that a relationship with God is more valuable than anything else we might gain (money, reputation, power, etc.).

The next Scripture I want us to consider points out that we continue to experience joy as we live in the kingdom:

Joy is the byproduct of discipleship (living as apprentices of Jesus). (John 15:11)

In John 15:11 Jesus makes a simple statement that speaks volumes about joy - His joy and our own.

11 "These things I have spoken to you so that My joy may be in you, and *that* your joy may be made full.

"These things" Jesus had spoken to them refers specifically to the teachings found in the first ten verses of the chapter. He had spoken to them about abiding in Him so that they would bear fruit. He had spoken to them about asking God for whatever they wanted. He had spoken to them about keeping His commandments, especially the commandment to love one another. In other words, Jesus had spoken to them about discipleship - about being apprenticed to Him and learning how to live as He did.

He had spoken to them about discipleship so that **His** joy would be in them. Even though Jesus had the most significant, intense, consequential mission in the history of mankind, He was full of joy. Throughout His life we see Him finding satisfaction in God and His ways. Jesus wanted His disciples to have that same joy that He had; and He wanted their joy to be made full. That joy would be the byproduct of discipleship: abiding in Him, praying to the Father, keeping His commandments, and loving one another.

Keep in mind that Jesus knew that their lives wouldn't be easy. He told them repeatedly that people would treat them the same way they treated Him. Of the 11 true disciples, ten would be martyred for their faith and the 11th (John) would die in exile on the Island of Patmos). Joy is not incompatible with hardship and suffering. If they walked with Jesus they would have the same joy that He had even though their lives would be hard.

The New Testament records some of their experience with joy. In Acts 5, for example, we read how the apostles (Peter and the others) were preaching Christ at the temple. The Jewish authorities were filled with jealousy and put the apostles in jail. During the night an angel miraculously opened the gates of the prison and told them to go back to the temple and tell about the life that's available in Jesus' name. The authorities had them arrested again. Some wanted to execute the apostles but instead they flogged them and warned them to speak no more in the name of Jesus.

If that happened to you, how would you respond? Is it possible to have joy after you've been publicly humiliated? Is it possible to have joy when your body is bleeding and sore from being flogged? Is it possible to have joy when you look to the future and have no idea how you're going to make it? We read this in Acts 5:41.

41 So they went on their way from the presence of the Council, rejoicing that they had been considered worthy to suffer shame for *His* name.

To rejoice is to express joy. They expressed their satisfaction over identifying with Jesus - sharing the fellowship of His sufferings (as Paul put it in Philippians 3:10). Their discipleship required them to preach Christ publicly and to suffer the consequences. And as they lived out their discipleship, the byproduct was joy. Your discipleship may look very different from theirs but the byproduct will just as surely be joy. (See also Romans 14:17.)

John Stott made a similar point about joy when he wrote this (he's using happiness and joy synonymously):

Joy and peace. . . are byproducts of love. God gives them to us, not when we pursue *them*, but when we pursue *him* and *others* in love . . . when we forget ourselves in the self-giving service of love, then joy and peace come flooding into our lives as incidental, unlooked-for blessings. (*Authentic Christianity*, p 222)

Jesus' teaching in John 15 and the disciples' experience in Acts 5 support this idea that joy is a natural byproduct of loving God and loving others. In other words, joy is the natural byproduct of discipleship because Jesus is still satisfying even when life is hard, even when there is opposition, even when we are persecuted.

I hope that these Scriptures help us see the proper place of joy in our lives. Joy isn't something tacked on to our relationship with God; rather, joy should be our experience from start to finish. We enter the kingdom of God out of joy, we experience joy as a byproduct of our discipleship, and we ultimately experience joy throughout all eternity!

Let's talk next about ***Cultivating Joy***:

We saw in Galatians 5:22 that joy is one aspect of the fruit of the Spirit. The Spirit Himself produces joy in our lives. But this doesn't mean that we are passive while the Spirit works or that there's nothing we can do to cultivate joy. Something similar can be said about each aspect of the fruit of the Spirit. Even though the Spirit produces peace, we are commanded to "let the peace of Christ rule within you" (Colossians 3:15). Even though the Spirit produces kindness, gentleness, and patience we are commanded to "put on a heart of compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience (Colossians 3:12). In the same way, we actively trust the Spirit to produce joy in our lives **as** we pursue it.

In this sense, joy is a lot like okra. God produces the okra in my garden; there is no way I could turn small, hard, round okra seeds into luscious fruitful okra plants. God produces the okra. But If you want okra in July, there are some things you'll need to do in May and June. You soak the seeds overnight, you plant them in rows, you water and weed your okra. After about two months the plants begins producing okra. The point I'm making (and I always have a point when I talk about okra) is that even though God produces the okra there's plenty I have to do also. And this process takes time.

In the same way, the Holy Spirit produces joy in our lives, but there are things we need to do in the process. There are things analogous to planting, watering, and weeding when it comes to the fruit of the Spirit. And this process also takes time. If you want joy

in 2014, there are some things you'll have to do in 2013. We'll talk about several of these in a few minutes.

But I also want to acknowledge that there's a "wildcard" when it comes to okra (and joy). Last year I did everything the same as every other year, but I only harvested 3 pods of okra. It was a hot, dry summer. My okra just didn't produce fruit. There are also hot, dry years in our lives when we experience very little joy. Sometimes it's hard to discern why there is little joy in our lives. At other times we have a pretty good idea why that is the case: you might have experienced some type of extreme suffering or loss; there may be physical/medical issues that dominate your life. If you're experiencing a dark or dry time in your life, it's understandable (and even okay) if you're not experiencing much joy during this season. It's likely God is doing some deep, deep work in your life, teaching you things about Himself that you wouldn't learn any other way. That knowledge of God will eventually be more satisfying than you know. In other words, a dark time in your life may be a prelude to a type of joy you would otherwise never experience.

Given that caveat, there are some things we can do to cultivate joy, inviting the Holy Spirit to produce this fruit in our lives:

Identify any sin that is robbing you of joy. (This is analogous to weeding your garden.) It makes sense that if salvation and discipleship and walking by the Spirit are supremely satisfying that the opposite would be supremely **unsatisfying**. If obedience bring joy, disobedience brings heartache and anxiety and sadness. This was David's experience when he sinned with Bathsheba. That sin introduced a world of heartache into his life. After he had repented (confessed his sin and came back to God), he wrote this in Psalm 51:

12 Restore to me the joy of Your salvation
And sustain me with a willing spirit.

David understood that joy naturally accompanied salvation. After he had confessed his sin, it was fully appropriate for him to pray and ask God to restore the joy of salvation.

Perhaps you can identify some sin that is working against your joy. If it's a habitual sin that has lingered for years you may not realize how oppressive and stifling it has been to your joy. Turning from that sin may take some time and spiritual energy; it may even involve some counseling. But a core conviction that you will need if you ever want to get past that sin is that the joy of obedience far exceeds the "passing pleasures of sin." This conviction really goes back to the goodness of God. You need to believe that God and His ways are good and good for you - not bad and bad for you.

Pay close attention to thoughts and emotions which either fuel or stifle our joy. Joy is not purely emotion, but there is certainly an emotional element to joy. Some translations of the Bible translate the term "happiness." Joy isn't some stoic belief in the goodness of God; joy involves **experiencing** the goodness of God and rejoicing

involves **expressing** the goodness of God. And that will certainly involve emotions/feelings of gladness.

I've been influenced greatly in my understanding of the role of emotions in the Christian life by Dallas Willard (who died on May 8th; who said last year, "I think that when I die it might be some time before I know it.") Willard wrote that "feelings and thoughts are largely a matter of choice" (*Renovation*, p. 34) - that we really aren't at the mercy of every thought and emotion that washes over us. He wrote that the primary exercise of the human will is "the power to select what we think on and how intently we will focus on it"; our decisions, actions, and feelings flow from what we think on and how intently we focus on it.

If you want to have joy, you have to pay attention to the things you think about and how intently you think about them. If you are preoccupied with what is wrong in your own life, in the lives of those around you, in the world, in the church, etc. . . it's no mystery why you don't find much satisfaction in God and in what He's doing all around you. It's no mystery why you don't experience gladness. I'm not suggesting that we bury our heads in the sand. But I am suggesting that we can either fuel or stifle joy in our lives by what we think. Our emotions are largely a byproduct of our thinking.

That's one reason why Paul wrote (Philippians 4:8):

8 Finally, brethren, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is of good repute, if there is any excellence and if anything worthy of praise, dwell on these things.

When we dwell on things that are excellent and worthy of praise, we fuel our joy. If you are stuck in negative, destructive, self-centered habits of thinking, one of the best things you can do to cultivate joy is begin dwelling on Scripture each day. Take ten minutes each day to read and ponder Scripture. After several weeks or months you might find yourself experiencing joy in ways you never have before. A couple weeks ago I came across a verse in Psalm 119:71 which said, "It is good for me that I was afflicted, That I may learn Your statutes." That thought never would have occurred to me - that the hardships in my life are what allow me to truly "learn" God's statutes. That simple thought helps me "consider it all joy when I encounter various trials." Pay close attention to thoughts and emotions because they will either fuel or stifle joy in your life.

Look for ways to rejoice with other people, in creation, and in everyday experiences. What I'm suggesting here is that we look outside of ourselves for sources of joy. We need to avoid a self-centered approach to joy in which we say, "I will only find joy in the satisfying things that God does **for me**." When we have that mindset, we effectively block out a whole world of joy that God has provided for us.

In Romans 12:15 Paul wrote, "Rejoice with those who rejoice, and weep with those who weep." Sometimes it's easier to weep with those who weep than to rejoice with those who rejoice. Our compassion naturally moves us toward people who are grieving in some way. But our compassion should also move us toward people who are full of joy.

In 1 Corinthians 13:6 Paul wrote that love “rejoices with the truth”; if we love others we will rejoice when they experience or live out the truth. If you don’t find much satisfaction in your own circumstances right now you can find satisfaction in the circumstances of others (if you’re looking for joy). When we studied Galatians 5 a few weeks ago we saw that the deeds of the flesh include jealousy and divisions; those are certainly things that will keep us from rejoicing with others.

Or try “looking up” if you want to experience more joy - literally look up into the heavens. The Psalmist was so very satisfied when he wrote, “The heavens are telling of the glory of God” (Psalm 19:1). He was reminded of God day and night through creation. If you care to notice, you can observe all sorts of satisfying things about God in creation: His power (thunderstorms), His creativity (flowers, animals, humanity), His provision (rain, sun, shade), etc. When it comes to finding joy in creation, “the sky is the limit” (as they say).

You can experience joy through everyday experiences - food and drink, playing with children, good music, reading, exercise, conversation, work, relationships, a good nap, etc. All of these things can be a source of joy when we remember that God is the giver of all good gifts. You can find joy in many different places if you have a mind to do so.

Continue to dwell upon your salvation (what God has done, is doing, and will do for you in Christ).

Here we return to the truth of the parable we read in Matthew 13: what God has done for us in Christ is supremely satisfying. We celebrate the Lord’s Table regularly in order to dwell upon the truth that Jesus died and rose again to bring us into a relationship with God and to bring us joy. Perhaps you’ve been so preoccupied with your circumstances lately that you haven’t really “fixed your eyes on Jesus” and the joy He offers. Allow this time at the Lord’s Table to fuel the joy of your salvation.