

Joy // Building Your Joy

The invitation to follow Jesus is not an invitation to a life of ease, void of difficulty, pain, grief, or sorrow. But it is an invitation into a life filled to the brim with an inexhaustible joy in the midst of the sadness and sorrows of life.

In Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings*, Gandalf is a picture of Christ in several different ways, and in Tolkien's description of him he says, when first looking at Gandalf one would notice only weathered lines of sorrow on his face...

But looking more intently, you would observe that:

"Under all there was a great joy: a fountain of mirth enough to set a kingdom laughing, were it to gush forth."

- JRR Tolkien, *The Lord of the Rings*

Now today, we're talking about building our joy. Practices that help us grow our capacity for the joy that God has made available to us in the person of Jesus.

But before we jump in, I need to dig into one thing we mentioned last week a bit more.

Biblical joy does not mean pretending that everything is okay when it isn't.

I recognize that doing a series on Joy during the holiday season can be problematic for some.

The National Alliance on Mental Illness found in a recent study that the 64% of people who are struggling with depression or anxiety already found that the holiday season made their conditions worse.

One of the respondents in the study said that *"the pressure to be joyful or social is tenfold."*

So, hear me, we're not talking about pretending or faking joyfulness. If you're struggling with depression or anxiety, it can be one of the most debilitating places to be because it can feel like you're all alone, and that there's no light at the end of the tunnel.

A few weeks back, I was visiting with a friend, and we ended up sharing about different points in our own lives where it was so dark for so long, that there were moments where we entertained the idea that the only way out, the only real solution was suicide. Extremely different life circumstances, but for each of us there was so much isolation and so much shame that we lost hope that life would ever get better. But it did get better.

And for each of us, bringing someone into that story we were telling ourselves, bringing those thoughts and feelings to a few trusted people, and bringing all of it to God in community... and God saw us through it.

If you're there... if you can relate to that, I want you to know a few things.

1. You're not alone. Do not isolate yourself.
2. Even though you can't see it today, there are much, much, better days ahead because Jesus is at work in ways you cannot currently see. The world is better with you in it.
3. Tell someone. Bring someone who you can trust into your situation. And if you don't know who to tell, you come tell me, one of our pastors, this is what the church is here for.
 - a. care@gracechapel.net.
 - b. 988 Suicide and Crisis Hotline.

When we're talking about joy, we're not talking about pretending.

And as we said last week, biblical joy is not ignorance to the problems of the world, or the struggles of normal life, but it's a deep knowing that behind all the problems and pain there is a redeemer at work in ways that we cannot comprehend.

A believer's joy begins with deep trust in the promise that that one day we'll be caught up in an endless torrent of joy that will never fade away, and even the happiest moments of this life pale in comparison to what we'll have in the life to come.

Now, today, we're talking about how we build our capacity for joy.

"Neurologists have shown that while most brain development stops sometime in childhood, the brain's 'joy center' – located and observable in the right orbital prefrontal cortex – is the only part of the brain that never loses its capacity to grow."

- Jonathan Grant

"When the joy center has been sufficiently developed, it regulates emotions, pain control and immunity centers; it guides us to act like ourselves; it releases neurotransmitters like dopamine and serotonin it is the only part of the brain that overrides the main drive centers - food, sexual impulses, terror, and rage - without sufficient "joy strength" we spend the rest of our lives trying to fill the deficit."

- Dr. James Friesen

Your brain has a joy center! And you can increase its capacity for joy! You can cultivate it, exercise it, develop it, grow it. Or you can starve it, deprive it, and unintentionally decrease your brains capacity for joy!

"Joy is essential to the spiritual life. Whatever we may think of or say about God, when we are not joyful, our thoughts and words cannot bear fruit... Joy does not simply happen to us. We have to choose joy and keep choosing it every day."

- Henri Nouwen

"Joy is part of the fruit of the Spirit (Gal. 5:22). Often I am inclined to think that Joy is the motor, the thing that keeps everything else going... we cannot continue long in anything without it."

- Richard Foster

Neuroscientists like Friesen and Grant, and Christian contemplatives like Nouwen and Foster, and many others, they are all observing what God has built into us from the beginning. The reality is this: You and I are not victims of our genetics or of our circumstances. We have been endowed by our Creator to live a joy filled life! Every person in this room and watching online, you and I have the capacity for joy, and the invitation from God is to cultivate it and live in it.

Q: So how do we do this? How do we increase our capacity for a defiant, resilient, exuberant, inexhaustible joy?

Philippians 4:4, "Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, rejoice."

The word rejoice means to throw a party! It's the verb of happiness or joy. It's literally to joy in the Lord. To make yourself happy in God. And notice, it's not... "if you can

muster it. If you can manage, be happy in God." It's a command! Do it! Celebrate! Rejoice! Throw a party!

But how? If we're not faking it, how do we do this? How do we get there?

Keep reading in Philippians 4.

Philippians 4:6, "...do not be anxious about anything," I love the way the King James says, **Philippians 4:6**, "Be careful for nothing."

Some of us are full of care for everything. I mean, is that not a perfect description of our world right now?

The world tells us that we're supposed to be full of care about all things. We're supposed to be outraged by this, and offended by that, and fearful of all kinds of things you and I have absolutely ZERO control over. No wonder we're miserable! No wonder we don't have any joy.

The world says have care, be concerned about everything. God commands, "*be careful for nothing. Don't be concerned about anything!*"

In fact, look at what Jesus tells us:

Matthew 6:25, "Therefore I tell you, do not be anxious about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, nor about your body, what you will put on."

Jesus is literally saying, have NO concern for your life, be carefree. Why?

Matthew 6:32-33, "For the Gentiles seek after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them all. But seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things will be added to you."

Followers of Jesus are commanded to be carefree! Jesus invites to live free of care! Free of concern. And if that concept is foreign to you, which it likely is to most of us, it means we have room to grow.

See, when you look at the life of Jesus there's not a single instance of Jesus being unhinged, outraged or panicked. He flips the tables as an act of justice, he endures

wrongful incrimination and crucifixion without retaliation or any loss of restraint. He's filled with grief, and anguish, but never panic and never outrage. He's unoffendable.

If you're following Jesus, your life ought to reflect the character, the grace, the ease, the pace at which Jesus lived.

See, when you have joy in God, you gain something that the world can't touch. The devil can't use it, the world can't monetize it, everybody wants it, but can't seem to find it, and God is saying to the Christians, you have it! It's available to you now! And it's what the world needs to see in us if they're ever going to have any hope of finding the God who is a God of joy.

Philippians 4:6-7, "...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."

This is about letting go of outcomes. It's about relinquishing the illusion of control. It's a reminder that we're not in charge and ultimately, there are an infinite number of situations and circumstances that are outside of our ability to control, influence, or manage. But it's also a reminder that even through we're not in charge, we know who is, and we can trust Him. Even though we're not the one's calling the shots, we can trust that no matter what comes our way, there is absolutely nothing in this life, not a single thing that can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus.

See, success in the kingdom of God is faithful obedience to Jesus no matter what. And so often what we try to do instead is manage outcomes. We think, "If I do this, then that..." And the invitation of Jesus is to leave the outcomes up to Him. Our job is to obey.

When we trust God, we're free to rely entirely on Him to provide everything we need. The peace of God surpasses understanding. You know what that means? It means people can't understand it. They'll try to. Someone will say, "Oh, it's because you're ignorant or uninformed. To which you can gladly say, "Ok" and go on your merry way! Wouldn't that be great? They wouldn't know what to do with you! But Paul doesn't end there. He says this:

Philippians 4:8, "Finally, 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."

If you're a miserable person, it's likely not because your life is miserable, but because the focus of your life is on miserable things. It literally takes no effort to think about negative things. You ever notice that?

You don't ever wake up and think, "now what are all the things that are going wrong in my world." No! You just wake up and they smack you! You're bombarded with what's wrong with the world, or what's not good enough about your life! It's incessant! And literally everything in our world is designed to make you discontent with your current circumstances.

Q: But what does Paul say? Quit letting what's wrong with the world or your own circumstances pull you along with it. Instead, meditate on what is true, honorable, just, pure, lovely, excellent, praiseworthy. In other words, discipline yourself to find the good around you, fix your mind on it, and thank God for it! Because if it is good, it came from God.

When we pay attention to everything that is good and right and true in God, over time, we become the kinds of people that are joyful.

Or we don't.

This is why some people as they age, they become more and more carefree. More and more joyful. More and more gracious. Kind, thoughtful, generous, selfless, loving. And others are becoming grumpier, more crotchety, sensitive, quick-tempered, critical, and negative. You have no resilience about you because you're following the ways of the world and not the ways of Jesus.

We become like what we give our attention to.

How much time do you spend thinking on what is good and beautiful and right, and praiseworthy, and true in your world? Are you overcome by the good in your world?

See, the discipline of celebration is an act of defiance. It's the most powerful act of defiance against a world set on misery and self-destruction.

What we see in Philippians 4 is a prescription for increasing or building our joy.

Philippians 4:9, "What you have learned and received and heard and seen in me—practice these things, and the God of peace will be with you."

Richard Foster in His great work Celebration of Discipline gives a bunch of ways to practice celebration and to increase our capacity for joy.

1. Music, Dancing, & Singing

It's biblical. Psalm 149, 150. King David dancing before the Lord.

Music and singing, or for some of us, noisemaking. That's why scripture tells us to make a joyful noise unto the Lord because for some of us, that's all you've got, and God says, it counts.

2. Humor & Laughter

Proverbs 17:22, "A joyful heart is good medicine,"

A happy heart is healing for the soul. It's where we get our adage that "Laughter is the best medicine."

Research shows that children laugh about 400 times a day, but adults on average laugh only about 15 times.

3. Reminiscing & Storytelling

There's a reason why the Bible is told in story form, or why great works like Lord of the Rings have weathered so well. People are storying creatures. We think in stories, we write in stories, we get lost in stories, and the Bible is the story of God and His creation.

4. Festivals & Holidays

We just celebrated thanksgiving. And we have the celebration of the birth of our Messiah right around the corner. One of the ways we're celebrating starting Dec 1 is as a family, we're reading through different aspects of the Incarnation each morning or evening to get our minds and hearts meditating on the goodness of God each day.

We have our own traditions we can create in our families or even as a church. We have our annual Christmas Tree lighting to kick off the Christmas season together as a church family. We drink hot chocolate, eat cookies, sing carols and all count down for the lighting of the tree! It's a beautiful tradition that we look forward to every year where we get to be with people that we love.

5. Feasts & Meals

Jesus was accused of being a drunkard and a glutton. Why? Because he was always breaking bread with people that according to the uptight religious people were the "wrong people."

6. Gratitude & Thanksgiving

We have a resource available to you today that we designed a few years ago that is specifically designed to help you practice what we read in Philippians 4.

It's our Forget Not Journal. It's one way to grow in your ability to think on all that is right and good, pure, and praiseworthy. A digital copy is available on our [website](#).

Here's where we'll end today... **VISION:**

In world that is filled with hate, and division, and fear, and outrage... what might happen if you became relentless in your pursuit of God and becoming a person of joy? The truth is, the more joy you have, the more loving you'll become. As you grow in joy, you will become irresistibly Christlike.

What if a whole community of people grew in godly joy? Resilient joy? Not just one or two of us, but hundreds of us. Because honestly, 1 message or 1 series on joy won't do it. But a community of people committed to growing in the joy of the Lord, slowly, steadily, incrementally, over time.

I'm pretty sure it would change the world. In fact, 2,000 years ago, a revolution of joy did change the world. Today, may you find joy in the Lord. May you find refreshment, peace, and even laughter in His presence. May the beauty of the gospel story captivate your heart and mind as you seek Him, obey Him, and grow to be as joyful as He is.