

The Joy of Doing Good

Ecclesiastes 3:12-15; John 13:17

January 15, 2006

Rev. Greg L. Price

DOING what is good (and not merely talking about doing what is good) is an essential ingredient to joy. We so often talk the talk, but less often walk the walk. One who is filled with the joy of the Lord is not self-absorbed, self-consumed, and self-preoccupied. He/She is one who is desiring, talking, praying, and DOING what is good.

Dear ones, our joy is made full in not merely professing our faith before others, but in giving hands and feet to that faith in reaching out to do good to one another (“Faith without works is dead” James 2:26). We can never know the joy of the Lord if we do not DO the will of God. I don’t mean a legalistic obedience. I mean an obedience that is the fruit of resting alone in the obedience of Christ as our only hope of ever being right with God.

If we take two children (one who is generally an obedient child and the other who is generally a rebellious child) and observe them closely, we will find that of the two children the one who is happy is the one who is generally obedient while the one who is miserable is the one who is generally disobedient. Joy is the reward that springs up in our own hearts when we know that we have pleased God, helped others, loved others, or have been an encouragement to others. The fruit of obedience to Christ is joy.

Do you wonder where the joy of the Lord has gone? It may be due to a self-serving lifestyle you have embraced. It may be due to a deliberate walking contrary to the commandments of God. When God removes from us His joy, peace of mind, and satisfaction, it is so often due to the fact that we are acting more like a rebellious child who wants his/her own way. Dear ones, let us remember that there is joy (and much joy that fills our heart) in doing what is good and right in the sight of God.

Let us turn our attention to the words of Solomon this Lord’s Day from Ecclesiastes 3:12-15, where we will focus our attention on the following two main ideas: (1) There Is Joy in Doing Good (Ecclesiastes 3:12-13); (2) There is Joy in Fearing God (Ecclesiastes 3:14-15).

I. There Is Joy in Doing Good (Ecclesiastes 3:12-13).

A. Solomon has just previously highlighted how the labor of men in ever changing circumstances is not the formula for a lasting joy. Dear ones, when our hope is not in the many changing circumstances in which man labors (Ecclesiastes 3:1-8), but rather in the unchanging God, who has made and shall make all things beautiful in His time (Ecclesiastes 3:9-11), that is the formula for a lasting joy. How can we tell what we are looking to at any particular moment of the day as the source of our joy? If we live in frustration, worry, or bitterness over the afflictions, trials, and delays that come into our lives, we are looking to people or to the circumstances of life to bring us joy. However, if we live in the hope that God has already made from eternity and shall make in the future everything beautiful in His own time, we are looking to Christ to bring us joy. To whom are you looking for that lasting joy, peace, and contentment?

B. Solomon now turns to two practical considerations (which form the main points of this sermon) as to what a man should do if he would know the joy of the Lord in a world where at times everything can seem upside down or inside out: (1) Do Good (in verses 12-13), and (2) Fear God (in verses 14-15), which we will consider under the next main point. Solomon offers his first practical consideration in Ecclesiastes 3:12-13.

1. The penitent Preacher has himself personally observed and learned this first practical

observation to be effective as a means to joy: "I know." Solomon had learned from his own experience that the pleasure, laughter, feasting, building projects, wealth, and fame of the world do not bring joy without Christ. He had to learn the hard way because he would not learn the easy way (i.e. by way of trusting and obeying Christ). What did Solomon say he knew: "I know that there is no good in them, but for a man to rejoice, and to do good in them." A better translation of the Hebrew text is this: "I know that there is nothing better for them except for a man to rejoice, and to do good in his life." This same Hebrew expression is likewise translated in our English text as "there is nothing better" in Ecclesiastes 2:24, Ecclesiastes 3:22, and Ecclesiastes 8:15. In other words, our inspired author is saying that in a world of such constant change as described in verses 1-8, there is nothing better for a man than to rejoice and to do good during the course of his entire life. The idea is the same as stated in Ecclesiastes 2:24. Obedience to Christ leads to satisfaction, joy, and peace. Disobedience to Christ leads to confusion, perplexity, and frustration. The "to rejoice, and to do good" in Ecclesiastes 3:12 is essentially the same as the "enjoying good" of Ecclesiastes 2:24. Joy comes from rejoicing in God's blessings and from doing what is good.

2. We will never rejoice in the many blessings God has graciously bestowed upon us, if we are not consciously thankful for the many blessings we have received from the Lord. If we sit around complaining about all of the trials, afflictions, and delays we endure and how poorly others have treated us, but do not turn to praise and thank our loving Father for all spiritual blessings and the many material blessings we undeservedly enjoy every moment of the day, we will be deservedly miserable. In fact, we have chosen to be miserable. For we have chosen to focus our attention upon what we do not have, rather than upon what we do have. We have chosen to blame God, rather than to praise God. We have chosen to be blind, rather than to see. We have chosen to grumble against God's good providence, rather than to rejoice in God's good providence (knowing He has made and shall make everything beautiful in His time).

3. What is it, "to do good"? To do good is to do that which is (1) for the glory of God, (2) out of love for God and our neighbor, and (3) according to the supreme standard of God's Word. Some of us think and act as if joy should simply fall out of heaven into our hearts because we intellectually know the truth.

a. Jesus was quite clear on this point. Joy is not the fruit of a mere intellectual knowledge of God or His truth. For the Lord Jesus who is our joy said, "If ye know these things, happy are ye IF YE DO THEM" (John 13:17). You see, dear ones, our blessed Savior did not say, "If ye KNOW these things, happy are ye" and leave it at that. For merely knowing (but not practicing what we know) will not bring joy and blessedness. To the contrary, it will only serve to make us more miserable. But doing what we know to be good, right, and true out of love for God and man brings a joy unspeakable and full of glory.

b. Likewise, James makes the same point in James 1:25. Notice carefully that it is not the forgetful hearer that is blessed. James says, "this man (i.e. the "doer") shall be blessed IN HIS DEED (i.e. IN HIS DOING). He shall be blessed not in his mere knowing, not in his mere professing, but IN HIS DOING.

c. It is not only not sin (in a negative sense) to eat and drink of the many earthly blessings of God (whether it be food, clothing, homes, health, jobs, wealth, family, and divine protection), it is a commanded duty (in a positive sense) to enjoy all such things to the glory of God (1 Timothy 6:17). For all that we have in this life by way of necessities and comforts are the gift of God graciously given to us. Thus, when we do not enjoy that which God graciously gives to us by way of time, talent, and treasure, we disobey God. We do that which is evil, rather than that which is good (Ecclesiastes 3:13). For, dear ones, to enjoy God's gifts to us with humble and thankful hearts is to enjoy the Giver of all good gifts. To enjoy God's good gifts (in a biblical sense) is not to be ruled by those gifts so that we forget God. To enjoy God's good gifts is not to make the gifts of God our lord and master, but rather to enjoy God's good gifts is to see the hand of God in every good gift and to worship Him for His goodness to us.

d. But consider this. Doing what is good and right is always more difficult when

there is a sacrifice to make, or when it will cost us something. It is much easier to do what is right when we not only do not suffer for it, but are immediately rewarded for it. For example, it is easy to do what is good when it comes to eating and drinking in the blessings of God as stated in Ecclesiastes 3:13 because it is comfortable. A command to do what is good in enjoying such blessings from God is a duty most of us would prefer to have set before us than a command to endure suffering, humiliation, affliction, and deprivation. But before there can be the sitting at the table to enjoy the blessedness of food and drink, there ordinarily comes the sorrow and tears of hard work and sacrifice (Psalm 126:5-6). What sacrifices has the Lord called you to make in doing what is good? The Lord promises that the sacrifices you make in doing what is good will pale in comparison to the joy you will receive from the Lord (in this life, but especially in the glories of heaven). Whatever you have to suffer in body or mind, whatever the temptations you must endure in this life, whatever the hardships and trials, whatever the pain and the sorrow, it will all fade away as nothing in comparison to the joy you will inhale (as the air you now breathe) when you cast your crowns before God, who worked within you both to will and to do His good pleasure (Philippians 2:13). Once in heaven, do you really believe anyone would give up the joys of heaven just to have had more comfort and less sacrifice upon earth? We need heaven's perspective every day. No matter how tired and exhausted we become in doing what is good, no matter what we must sacrifice in doing what is good, IT WILL BE WORTH IT ALL when we stand in the presence of our Savior and rest for all eternity from the sorrows, heartaches, trials, temptations, sins, and tears of this life. Don't give up! Don't quit! Press on in doing good and in resting in the promises of Christ. Dear ones, one of the most important steps that any of us can take when we are wallowing in self-pity and feeling sorry for ourselves is to force ourselves to get active in DOING good to others (even if we do not initially feel like it). Do what is good and pray for the affections to accompany or follow the doing. Dear Christian, look not only at the sacrifices of training and running a good race for Christ, but look in hope to the finish line and to the eternal joy and blessedness that will be yours. Dear ones, THERE IS JOY IN DOING GOOD.

II. There Is Joy in Fearing God (Ecclesiastes 3:14-15).

A. Solomon now turns to the second practical consideration as to what a man should do, if he would know the joy of the Lord in a world where at times everything can seem upside down or inside out. Solomon not only leads us to joy by means of DOING GOOD, but he would also lead us to joy by means of FEARING GOD. Whereas DOING GOOD is more active on the part of the Christian, I would suggest that FEARING GOD is more passive on the part of the Christian. For in FEARING GOD there is the idea of quietly resting and humbly submitting to the eternal purposes of God, which He brings into our lives by His good providence. To fear God is to reverently stand in awe and wonder of His power, His wisdom, His mercy, and His faithfulness to undeserving sinners in ordering all things in our lives for the beauty of His own glory and for the benefit of His beloved children (who due to their sin deserve nothing from God but His everlasting condemnation). If that does not cause our jaw to drop, our head to bow, and our heart to melt, nothing else will.

B. Again Solomon speaks from his own personal experience of what he has learned: "I know" (Ecclesiastes 3:14). What has Solomon personally learned? He has learned in effect that God's eternal purposes and appointed seasons in his life (and our lives) are unchangeable. Here is an irony. The events of Ecclesiastes 3:1-8 are in one sense (from an earthly perspective) changeable and alterable according to the designs of men, and therefore, we cannot look to them to bring us joy. However, these same events are in another sense (from a heavenly perspective) unchangeable by God's eternal decree, and therefore we must see these events as ordained by God in order to bring us joy. From heaven's perspective, there is no adding to nor taking from the events that occur in your life and mine (Ecclesiastes 3:14). They are forever settled and determined by our most wise, loving, and holy God. That which has been eternally decreed by God in wisdom

and holiness is now falling out, and that which is yet to happen in the future is simply that which has already been eternally decreed by God (Ecclesiastes 3:15). The events of every day are divinely appointed for His glory and for the good of His Church collectively and His children individually. From the divisions that rend the peace and unity of Christ's Church, to the individual trials and afflictions that a Christian suffers—there are no accidents. There are no surprises that catch God unexpectedly (Psalm 33:10-11). The Lord Jesus likewise has left us such comfort in His own ordering of all events that come into our own lives. For even when persecution and martyrdom is what He has ordained for us, we are not to forget His love for us in so ordaining even those events. For He who has ordained both persecution and martyrdom for us knows us and cares for us. He has not forgotten us when we suffer. The very hairs on our head are numbered. And if the Lord knows when every sparrow falls to the ground, He certainly will not be forgetful or distracted when one of His own dear children falls to the ground in persecution or death (Matthew 10:28-31).

C. It is one thing to know intellectually these truths, but another thing to quietly rest in God's eternal purpose and good providence for you, His child. It is one thing to profess with your mouth that you believe these truths, but another thing to humbly submit yourself to whatever God may bring into your life as ultimately being for your good. This is the fear of God. To see with the eye of faith the awesome hand of God in what you are experiencing and to reverently bow before Him and to acknowledge as did David when stones were hurled at him as he fled from his own son, Absalom: "The LORD hath said unto him, Curse David. Who shall then say, Wherefore hast thou done so" (2 Samuel 16:10). Dear ones, in this path and in this path alone is joy to be found. Humbly submitting in the fear of God to whatever He brings into your life (for His own wise and holy purposes). Learning not to grumble or to complain. Learning not to wallow in self-pity. Learning not to worry or to fear. Learning not to become frustrated or angry. But rather learning to rest. Learning to receive both the good and the ill from the hand of God for your benefit and profit. This is the path to joy. I can assure you that the joy of the Lord will elude you, if you choose not to walk this path. Is it easy? No. Is it comfortable? No. Does it lead us to joy? Absolutely. For, dear ones, it is the very road which the Lord Jesus Himself walked.

D. We read even concerning the Lord Jesus that His joy was found in SUBMITTING to the will of His Father—not merely knowing it, or merely professing it, but DOING it and SUBMITTING to it: "Looking unto Jesus the author and finisher of our faith; who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is set down at the right hand of the throne of God" (Hebrews 12:2). The Lord Jesus submitted to God's most wise and holy plan for His life, although it meant ENDURING THE CROSS and DISMISSING THE SHAME that was brought by sinners against Him. And the reward of His submission was JOY. We are so short-sighted at times, thinking that joy will be ours if we can only sit on the throne (as it were)—if we could only be free of this trial, affliction, heartache, slander, sorrow, or delay. If we could only get off that cross, there would be joy. But the example of our Lord rebukes such a sinful way of thinking in us all. It was not in His getting off of that cross (which would have been an act of disobedience to the will of the Father), but rather it was in suffering the cross (in DOING the will of God and SUBMITTING to it, even when it was hard, difficult, painful, stressful, and sorrowful) that a joy unspeakable and full of glory was realized. And likewise, dear ones, it is not in getting off the cross of suffering that God has brought into your lives that you will taste the sweet fruit of the joy of the Lord, but rather in enduring the cross that God has prepared for you every day—obediently enduring the rejection of friends and loved ones, the sorrow and physical afflictions of this life, the heartache of disappointments, the death of loved ones, the slander of others for the sake of Christ. Then, and only then, will the joy of the Lord be realized in your life and mine.

Copyright 2006 Greg L. Price.