

Joy through Ministry

Fellowship with God Part 5

1 John 1:4

Summary: Joy is better than relief (better to be happy in pain than to not be happy without pain). Joy is a feeling of happiness – an extremely desirable thing to have. Joy was the Apostles’ motive for ministry (selfishness is when you lift some personal desire above others’ best interests. But your joy is in their best interests.) Joy is not opposed to righteousness – it is required for righteousness. Get joy not by reducing suffering but through loving in ministry. The goal of ministry is spiritual growth in people which, if we love God, know how much God delights in spiritual growth in His saints, and offer our ministry as a conscious expression of love, will bring us great joy.

That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have observed, and have touched with our hands, concerning the Word of life-- 2 that life was revealed, and we have seen it and we testify and declare to you the eternal life that was with the Father and was revealed to us-- 3 what we have seen and heard we also declare to you, so that you may have fellowship with us; and indeed our fellowship is with the Father and with His Son Jesus Christ. 4 We are writing these things so that our joy may be complete.

Introduction

Joy is better than relief

If you could change one thing about the circumstances in your life, what would it be? Most people would probably choose to eliminate some suffering or difficulty or pain. People tend to focus on the difficulties of life and assume that it is the suffering that is preventing them from being happy, so if they had one wish it would be to get rid of their suffering. It is a sad thing, because when those circumstances do change and that particular suffering does go away, they still are not happy. And there are people who have that exact same kind of suffering – or even worse – and they are full of joy. Think about this – if your life were full of joy - not phony joy or pretend happiness, but your heart really was filled full of genuine, exuberant, heartfelt joy, what would it matter what the other circumstances of your life were? Think of the painful things that you tend to think must be eliminated in order for you to be happy. If God came to you and said, “I’ll give you a choice. Either you can have that suffering go away (which may or may not result in you being happy), or you can have fullness of joy in your life even as that suffering continues,” which would you choose? Joy is more valuable than mere relief.

It is amazing how much of Scripture is devoted to teaching us about joy. Today’s text is one of those passages.

4 We are writing these things so that our joy may be complete.

Definition of joy

The Greek word translated **joy** is *chara*. It means joy, a feeling of inner happiness, gladness, delight. Some people have tried to say it is not a feeling. That is dead wrong – it is a feeling. In James 4:9 it is the opposite of gloom.

James 4:9 Change your laughter to mourning and your joy to gloom.

The word translated “gloom” refers to sorrow, despair, or being dejected. In several passages it is the opposite of grief.

John 16:20 You will grieve, but your grief will turn to joy.

In Heb.13:17 it is the opposite of the way you feel when you groan and complain. In Mt.13:20, 44 it is the feeling you have when you get something you really, really want. In Lk.10:17 it is the way you feel when you have great success in some important endeavor. In Lk.2:10 it is the way you feel when you get some terrific news. In Lk.15 it is the way you feel when you find some valuable thing that was lost, or when a broken relationship is restored. In Jn.16:21 it is the way a woman feels after she gives birth and sees her baby. In Acts 8:8 it is the way you feel if you were crippled or paralyzed and you have been instantly healed. In Acts 12:14 it is the way you feel when someone you dearly love returns to you. In the book of Hebrews it is a feeling that is so powerful that you would rather have it than anything else. In Heb.12:2 it was the feeling set before Christ that enabled Him to think little of His suffering on the cross. In Heb.10:34 the people's joy was so extreme that when the people came and broke into their homes and took away all their stuff, they were happy! It was painful to lose all their stuff, but their joy was greater than that pain.

In Jn.16:22 Jesus said that no one can take this kind of joy away from you. The shallow joys of this world are easily taken away. If you have joy in your job, Satan can easily take away your joy by taking away your job – or your family or your health or your money or possessions or reputation or whatever it is that is the source of your joy. The joy that comes from earthly things cannot survive suffering. If the suffering is great enough it will eventually overwhelm the joy.

But joy in Christ cannot be taken away, because no one can take Christ away. That means not even suffering can take it away. Joy in Christ runs so deep that the feeling of happiness from it will have a bigger effect on how you feel than even the most horrible suffering or loss. It will be a joy so overpowering that even when you are weeping bitterly over some devastating loss- the loss of your health or of a job or of a loved one - even in those times, the sorrow and pain will be real, and it will hurt, but still you will feel more joy than sorrow.

How would you like to have that – a whole lot of it?

Motive for Ministry: Why should you serve?

The Apostles' motive: Joy

John's ministry of preaching the gospel cost him a lot – it got him banished to an island as a prisoner. The rest of the Apostles were killed for their ministries. What was the motive that drove them to be so devoted to ministry? It would be good for us to discover that motive, because most of us struggle with laziness, don't we? So if we could discover a motive for ministry that is enough to drive a person to work like the Apostles worked, that would be a great thing.

4 We are writing these things so that our joy may be complete.

The motive that was so compelling that it drove them to lay down their very lives was joy. The earlier Greek copies of 1 John say "our joy." Later on it got changed to "your joy." That kind of a copying mistake is not surprising, since "your joy" seems like it makes a little better sense. The King James says "your joy," because back in 1611 when the King James was published they did not have access to the early manuscripts that we have today. But the modern translations are correct – "our joy" is the original reading. John and the other Apostles carried out their ministries - and were motivated to keep at it even when they were beaten and mocked and imprisoned and put to death; and the motive that kept them moving through all that was their desire for fullness of joy. That was John's motive and that was Paul's motive.

2 Corinthians 2:3 I wrote this very thing so that when I came I wouldn't have pain from those who ought to give me joy

People ought to give you joy when you minister to them. He wrote what he wrote and preached what he preached and did the ministry that he did in order to get joy. In Php.2:2 he commanded that the Philippians be humble and loving toward each other in order to make Paul's joy complete.

Is Seeking Joy Selfish?

Is that a proper motive for ministry? Is it appropriate for me to go through life with the goal of feeling good? Is that really a virtue?

A lot of people do not know what to do with joy in the Bible. On the one hand it is part of the fruit of the Spirit. It is both promised and commanded in Scripture. It is offered as an incentive. But on the other hand it seems like such a selfish thing to pursue. The Bible also talks about self-denial. How can the pursuit of your own joy be good if self-denial is also good? And so some people teach that it is okay to have joy as a part of your motive, but things like love or duty are much higher motives. Others take it even further and say that if self-interest is any part of your motive at all then your motive is bad. That comes out of the philosophy of the Stoics and Emmanuel Kant,¹ and that influence has found its way into Christianity. The New Testament scholar T. W. Manson, commenting on the reward in Luke 14:14, says, "The promise of reward ... is there as a fact. You do not live this way for the sake of reward. If you do you are not living in this way but in the old selfish way."² People who teach that point to 1 Cor.13:5 – "Love is not self-seeking." If you are seeking some benefit or reward, then you are being self-seeking, or selfish, and that destroys the morality of the act.

Is that true? If you do something because you enjoy it, does that make it selfish? If so, then it would be impossible to do a good deed unless you had no desire to do it (Because if you desire to do it, then you are getting enjoyment from doing it.) That would mean that if you desire anything good, then you cannot be good. The only way to be good is to not want to – that way you get no reward from it. Do you see how ridiculous that is? According to that philosophy it would be a sin to enjoy being kind to people. It would be a sin to take delight in helping someone who is in trouble.

The Bible teaches exactly the opposite of that. What makes you a good person is not doing good things when you don't want to. What makes you a good person is wanting to do good things. In fact, the greatest measure of how good you are is your desires – what you love to do. Evil people are evil because of what they love, and righteous people are righteous because of what they love.

2 Tim.3:1-5 But mark this: There will be terrible times in the last days. People will be lovers of themselves, lovers of money, ... not lovers of the good, ... lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God."

1 Tim.3:2-3 The overseer must be ... a lover of money but one who loves what is good.

Ro.12:9 Hate what is evil; cling to what is good.

God commands both righteous actions and righteous affections. The person who obeys both commands does better than the one who obeys only one.

So if God commands that we not only do good but that we also love doing good, then failure to enjoy doing good is sin – not the other way around. Selfishness is bad; self-interest is not bad. Selfishness is when you have desires that are not in someone else's best interests, and you place those desires as a higher priority than the other person's best interests. For example, if I have the desire to watch TV, but it is in my family's best interest for me to shut the TV off and have family devotions with them, if I choose to just keep watching TV – that is sinful selfishness. However, if I have devotions

¹ Emmanuel Kant, *Fundamental Principles of the Metaphysic of Morals*, Thomas Kingsmill Abbot tr. [book online] 1785 accessed 7 December 2007, available from <http://www.gutenberg.org/dirs/etext04/ikfpm10.txt>, Internet.

² T. W. Manson, *The Sayings of Jesus* (London: 1949) 280.

with them because I desire to spend time with them in the Lord, and I desire to see them progress spiritually, and I desire to please the Lord, and I want the rewards God offers for serving Him, and all those desires are stronger than my desire to watch TV – that would be righteousness. It is the opposite of selfishness, even though I would be acting in my own self-interests. If doing that which is in your own self-interest were wrong, then you could never do anything right, because all good is in your best interests. And if God offers a reward and you thumb your nose at that reward and treat it as though it were no big deal that dishonors God.

Is not righteousness more important?

When I began the sermon by asking you if you would like to have joy, it may be that some of you were thinking this way: “I wouldn’t mind joy, but that is not my greatest desire. What I really, really want is righteousness. If I could just be rid of this sin in my life, if I could just be holy and pleasing to God, if I could just do something that would glorify and honor Him and delight Him that is all I care about.”

It is a good thing to care mostly about righteousness. But it is misguided to think that the pursuit of righteousness and the pursuit of joy are two different things. There is no greater way to glorify God than by having joy in Him. That shows Him to be the all-satisfying treasure that He is. And there is no greater way to conquer sin in your life than through joy in God. If you experience great happiness and delight in His presence, and you train your soul to realize that that happiness is forfeited when you prefer sin or cling to some idol, that will give you power in resisting sin that will make godly choices 1000 times easier to make.

How to Get Joy

So let’s see what we can learn from this verse about how to get joy.

Joy through addition, not subtraction

I mentioned earlier that people think if they could just eliminate some trial from their life they would be happy. But that is folly because when they eliminate those trials they find they are still not happy - and other people who have even worse trials are very happy. That is because joy does not come from subtracting pain from your life. Joy comes from adding something. John did not say, “We try to eliminate our suffering so our joy may be full.”

Joy through ministry

4 We are writing these things so that our joy may be full.

Joy comes through ministry. **These things** refers to everything he said in verses 1-3. The Apostles carried out their ministry of preaching the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ because they wanted joy. It is significant that he points to joy rather than duty. He does not say, “We write these things because it is our duty, and we are committed to carry out what is expected of us.” Their motive was higher than mere duty. If you do your ministry at church, or if you are a good husband to your wife, or a good wife to your husband, and your motive is mainly a sense of duty, then you are probably not as good a wife or husband or minister as you think you are. The man who says to his wife, “I have no desire to be with you, and I am only taking you on this date because it is my duty before God – but I do not enjoy it one bit” – that is not love. When a man says, “I want you. I want to be with you. I want to talk to you and look at you and enjoy your personality. I want to hear your beautiful voice. I love your embrace. I love being around you. I cannot get enough of you.” His wife does not hear that and say, “Selfish! All you care about is what you want – what you enjoy.”

Non-joyful ministry is a sin. It dishonors people and it dishonors God, and it is a reproach on the name of Christ – and it angers Him.

Malachi 1:10–13 “Oh, that one of you would shut the temple doors, so that you would not light useless fires on my altar! I am not pleased with you,” says the LORD Almighty, “and I will accept no offering from your hands.”¹¹ My name will be great among the nations ...¹² “But you profane it by saying of the Lord's table, 'It is defiled,' and of its food, 'It is contemptible.’”¹³ And you say, 'What a burden!' and you sniff at it contemptuously," says the LORD Almighty. "When you bring injured, crippled or diseased animals and offer them as sacrifices, should I accept them from your hands?" says the LORD.

When you do exactly what God has told you to do out of a sense of duty, but on the inside your attitude is, “What a burden,” you are profaning the Lord’s great name. The opportunity to serve the King of kings is an unspeakable privilege. It is like being invited to a banquet, walking up to the food, sniffing at it, and turning up your nose. You come into a place that God calls His Temple – a church, and you look around at the people and the music and the way things are done, and you sniff at it contemptuously and turn up your nose: “I don’t care for that. That is not really my style. I could take that or leave it.” And you look over the list of available ministries and ways you can serve the body and you think, “I think I’ll pass”- that is deeply dishonoring to the Lord. It is absolutely unacceptable to serve the Lord with a “What a burden” attitude.

So what should you do if that is how you feel? Just drop out of ministry? If it is a burden for me to go over to someone’s house and encourage him, should I just stay home instead? No. If God commands us to encourage one another and He commands us to love doing it, then if you are breaking the second command (because you don’t love doing it), the solution is not to break the first one also. If you are disobeying the command to love, do not make it even worse by also disobeying the command to act. The solution is to keep obeying the first command and repent of your disobedience to the second command. As you are driving over to the person’s house, and it is not something you want to do, repent of your sinful affections, and cry out to God to show you the good of what it is you are doing (“Lord, open my eyes – help me see why this is such a privilege and should be an occasion of such joy), so that by the time you get there you are delighted to be there.

Grudging ministry is not only a reproach on the name of Christ, but it is also unloving to people.

Hebrews 13:17 Obey your leaders and submit to their authority. They keep watch over you as men who must give an account. Obey them so that their work will be a joy, not a burden, for that would be of no advantage to you.

Do you see that? If someone is serving you in ministry and his work is a burden to him rather than a joy – that is no advantage to you, which means it is a disadvantage to you. If I see my ministry as burdensome then I am stealing something from you. You will not profit from my ministry as much if I fail to have joy so that means the most loving thing I can do for you is to do exactly what John did and seek joy in ministry. If you try to minister to people, "It is a matter of indifference to me if he finds fellowship with God," you would be evil. If you are offering someone the greatest treasure imaginable, and your attitude is, “I don’t really care one way or another if he receives it,” you would be evil. If it really is a treasure, then the more you love that person the more you will desire that they receive it, and the happier you will be when they do receive it. The driving motive for all ministry should always be joy.

Joy through love

“But if I don’t have joy in my ministry, how do I get it?” To answer that question you need to understand the connection between joy and love. Love is what makes joy, joy. The deeper the love, the

greater the joy. If you love Cheesecake Factory cheesecake a little bit then you will have a little bit of joy when you go there. If you love it a lot you will have a lot of joy when you go there. How much joy would you get if your team won the Superbowl? If you do not care at all about football then it will bring you no joy. If you are a fanatic, it will bring you huge amounts of joy. Your joy cannot be any stronger than your love.

So if you find yourself not enjoying ministry – it is a drudgery, you are burned out, you cannot stand dealing with the people, it is too disorganized, too time-consuming - the solution is not to say, “I do not enjoy it therefore I am going to sit out of ministry for now.” Do not ever be content to be without joy in God – or to have meager amounts of joy in God. Keep seeking joy by continuing in ministry and increasing your love. If you want more excitement on Superbowl day, you need to increase your love for football. If you want more joy in ministry, you need to increase your love for God and His people.

So you can see that my last point and this point are really the same point. Joy through ministry and joy through love for people are exactly the same thing. The reason ministry brings joy is because it is the greatest way to show love to people.

And there are a lot of ways to express your love for God. You can express it in prayer and worship, and that brings joy. You can express it by the eagerness you have as you approach His Word. That brings joy. But the way of expressing love to God that will bring you the most joy is expressing your love for Him by loving His people. God wants us to focus more on loving people than on anything else, so He made that the expression of love for Him the one that will bring us the most joy.

2 John 1:4 It has given me great joy to find some of your children walking in the truth

3 John 3 It gave me great joy to have some brothers come and tell about your faithfulness to the truth and how you continue to walk in the truth. 4 I have no greater joy than this: to hear that my children are walking in the truth.

John was an old man. He had experienced a lot of adventures and a lot of pleasures and a lot of wonderful things, but there was not a single thing in the world that could possibly make him feel more happiness than the spiritual progress of God’s people. Not money, not sex, not vacations, not recreation, not food, not all his success and fame in the Church - there was no pleasure in life greater for him than this. And again, John speaks for all the Apostles.

Philippians 2:2 make my joy complete by being like-minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and purpose.

1 Thessalonians 3:9 How can we thank God enough for you in return for all the joy we have in the presence of our God because of you?

1 Thessalonians 2:19 For what is our hope, our joy ... Is it not you? ²⁰ Indeed, you are our glory and joy.

2 Corinthians 7:4 I have great confidence in you; I take great pride in you....in all our troubles my joy knows no bounds.

Now, maybe some of you are thinking, *I’ve poured myself out in love for people and it brought me hardly any joy at all. In fact, I am much happier when I am at home alone than when I am with Christians at church.* How do we account for that? How do we explain the fact that ministering to people made John’s joy complete, it made Paul’s joy overflow, it even filled up Jesus’ heart with great joy, and yet so many times when we love each other it does not increase our joy? Let’s think through the possible answers to that question.

How about this – Could it be that the reason some of us do not get a lot of joy out of loving people is simply because that is just not our cup of tea? Certain activities are appealing to some people and not others. Some people like to play chess, others do not. Some think shuffleboard is exciting, others think it is boring. And some people are extroverts and love being around people; others are naturally introverted and it is draining to be around people. So could it be that some of us do not get a lot of joy out of loving people just because of our personality type? No. That is not a possibility. Scripture is emphatic about the fact that loving God by loving His people is the main source of joy for the Christian. There are no asterisks in my Bible in those passages that restrict the application to one personality type. If you experience loving God through loving His people, it is guaranteed that it will generate great joy in your life no matter what your personality type is.

So where does that leave us? What other explanations are there for why so many of us have not experienced what the Apostles describe as their experience in loving people? It seems to me there are three possibilities: (1) We do not love God enough. The intensity of the joy is dependent upon how much you love God. The stronger my love for God the more enjoyable it will be for me to love those He loves. (2) We do not have a good understanding or awareness of how much delight God takes in His people. The thing that causes us to esteem other believers highly and take great delight in them is the fact that they are so precious to God. So if your idea of that preciousness is foggy, your esteem for them is not going to be as high. When you really love someone, what makes them happy makes you happy. So it is important for us to understand how happy it makes God when spiritual progress is made by His people, when sinners repent and return to Him. The entire chapter of Luke 15 is devoted to teaching that. Jesus taught three parables in a row all about how much joy is in the heart of God when a sinner repents. Jesus compares God to a shepherd, a woman, and a father. First, the shepherd, who leaves the flock in order to search for the lost sheep.

Luke 15:5-7 When he has found it, he joyfully puts it on his shoulders, ⁶ and coming home, he calls his friends and neighbors together, saying to them, 'Rejoice with me, because I have found my lost sheep!' ⁷ I tell you, in the same way, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over 99 righteous people who don't need repentance.

That parable is all about joy in heaven. Then He tells another one that is also about joy in heaven. In this one a woman loses a very valuable coin, and sweeps the house and searches carefully to find it.

⁹ When she finds it, she calls her women friends and neighbors together, saying, 'Rejoice with me, because I have found the silver coin I lost!' ¹⁰ I tell you, in the same way, there is joy in the presence of God's angels over one sinner who repents.'

Again – it is all about joy in heaven. Then He tells a third parable. This one is a long one about a son who goes astray and leaves his father, and then later he comes to his senses and repents and comes back to his father with an attitude of humility.

²⁰ So he got up and went to his father. But while the son was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion. He ran, threw his arms around his neck, and kissed him. ²¹ The son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and in your sight. I'm no longer worthy to be called your son.' ²² "But the father told his slaves, 'Quick! Bring out the best robe and put it on him; put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. ²³ Then bring the fattened calf and slaughter it, and let's celebrate with a feast, ²⁴ because this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found!' So they began to celebrate.

Then the older brother starts to complain. He is not one bit happy. He is like the Pharisees who were grumbling because Jesus was spending time with repentant sinners. In fact, that is the whole reason Jesus told this parable. Look back at the opening verses of the chapter.

Luke 15:1-3 All the tax collectors and sinners were approaching to listen to Him. ² And the Pharisees and scribes were complaining, "This man welcomes sinners and eats with them!" ³ So He told them this parable:

They saw repentant sinners being welcomed and it bothered them. And so Jesus told three parables that are all about the joy of God over repentant sinners. And the third story is especially beautiful – until the end, when that dumb older brother chimes in and ruins the entire story. And that is Jesus' point. The Pharisees are like that older brother. Jesus told this parable in order to show them how different their affections were from God's. When God is rejoicing, they are grumbling. So the more you love God the more you will rejoice when people are getting closer to God and repenting of sin. And that is what the father tries to explain to the older brother.

³² But we had to celebrate and rejoice, because this brother of yours was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found."

So all that is to show you how exuberantly happy God is over spiritual progress in His people. He is like that shepherd; He is like that woman; and He is like that father.

Now, I told you there were three possibilities for why we fail to have joy when we love people through ministry. We do not love God enough. We do not have a good understanding or awareness of how much delight God takes in His people. Now let me give you a third possibility. It could be that we fail to get joy from loving people because what we are doing is not really a conscious, intentional expression of love for God. Maybe there is a great deal of love for God in your heart, and maybe you understand how much God loves His people and desires to see them progress spiritually, but when you love people you do not make the connection. Your love for people terminates on those people. It just lands on them and goes nowhere else. You love them for their sake alone, and not as a conscious act of fellowship with God. When you look at them you do not see beings who are eternally precious to God – you just see people.

There is a special love in my heart for the children of my dearest friends. But if I saw those children as just random kids – and did not know they were my friends' kids, then my affection for them and delight in them would not be as great. In order for this to work it is essential that we learn to see one another through God's eyes – as His dear, precious, beloved children. We need to look at those seated around us and see people over whom there is great rejoicing in heaven. See that person sitting near you? If that person is a Christian then when they first repented of their sins and came to Christ, there was a thunderous, bone-rattling sound of laughter and singing and shouts of joy coming from the very throne of God. And if you were to do something this morning or this week – use your spiritual gift in some way that, directly or indirectly led to them moving a little closer to God and making some spiritual progress, those thunderous shouts of joy would happen again. God would be exuberantly happy with them and exuberantly happy with you. You spend an hour in the nursery so some parent can hear some exhortation from God's Word, and that results in increased godliness, heaven explodes with joy! You greet a visitor, or pray for someone in your small group, or encourage someone who is down, or give of your finances joyfully, or do something to make this facility more conducive for ministry, or whatever your ministry is; and as a result some folks profit spiritually from the ministry of this church; God is deeply moved in His great heart with a happiness that is greater than anything we could imagine. And when you understand how much God loves to see that, so that all of your ministry toward us, and all of your acts of love toward us are all conscious gestures of your love for God; that is when the real joy will come. All of our acts of ministry and love must be intentional expressions of love for God in order for them to produce the kind of joy they are supposed to produce.

So when we learn how pleased God is with the spiritual growth of His people, and we increase in our love for God, and we help His people make progress spiritually as a conscious expression of love

toward God; when we do all three of those, that is when ministry will bring us full, complete, unbounded joy that is greater than any suffering.

The goal of ministry: Their joy

So the goal of ministry is God's joy. We serve in ministry because nothing makes us happier than the joy of God. And what is it that we are trying to accomplish in ministry? When the Apostles worked so hard in ministry with people, what was it they were working to achieve in people's lives?

2 Corinthians 1:24 we are workers with you for your joy, because it is by faith that you stand firm.

They worked for the joy of the people. You know your ministry is a success not when you fill a stadium with thousands of people, or you make the cover of Christianity Today magazine – or get on Larry King; you know your ministry is a success when you bring people to a point of having joy in God. If you can manage to cause someone to have a smile on their face that is not an expression of delight in some earthly thing, but an expression of delight in God, then you have had success.³

The inseparability of loving God and loving people

So you can see why love for God and love for people is so inseparable. As we talked about last week during the Q&A - if you think you can love God without loving people (you go up into the mountains by yourself on Sunday morning to worship, so your love for God is a private affair), you are greatly mistaken. If your love for God is not expressed through loving people then it does not exist.

And the same logic works from the other side. People who think they are automatically loving God just because they feed the poor and show kindness to people, but they pay no attention to God Himself – they are mistaken too. There is no true love for people that is not rooted in love for God.

Love for God and love for people cannot be separated. And if they are separated then what is left is not true love at all. But when they are united together, then you can hardly distinguish between the two.

Psalm 16:2-3 I said to the LORD, "You are my Lord; I have no good besides You."

³ The essence of the Christian life is joy. Jesus once summarized what it means to be a Christian in one single verse. He boiled it down to its most basic core for us. He said it is like having your eyes opened to what an incredible treasure the Lord Jesus Christ is, and having so much joy in realizing that you can actually have this treasure that your joy drives you to prefer it over everything else in life.

44 "The kingdom of heaven is like treasure, buried in a field, that a man found and reburied. Then in his joy he goes and sells everything he has and buys that field.

Is self-denial an important part of the Christian life? Absolutely. But it is a self-denial driven by joy. Joy says, "I can't wait to unload these earthly pleasures in exchange for something I want a whole lot more!" Paul wanted us to follow the example of the Macedonian churches.

2 Corinthians 8:2 Out of the most severe trial, their overflowing joy and their extreme poverty welled up in rich generosity.

When your life is driven by joy you are an imitator not only of them and of Paul, but of the Lord Jesus Himself.

1 Thessalonians 1:6 and you became imitators of us and of the Lord when, in spite of severe persecution, you welcomed the message with the joy from the Holy Spirit.

And so there is nothing better you could wish for someone that Ro.15:13.

Romans 15:13 Now may the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.

That is the goal of ministry. It was the goal of Jesus' earthly ministry.

John 17:13 "I am coming to you now, but I say these things while I am still in the world, so that they may have the full measure of my joy within them.

John 15:11 I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete. ¹² My command is this: Love each other as I have loved you.

His great desire for these people around you is that they might have fullness of joy through loving others. And so the more you love Him the more that will be your great desire.

It is not that he had 99.9% of his delight in God and .01 in other things. God was 100% of his delight, and outside that he had zero delight. But what about the saints? If 100% of his delight is in God, does that mean he takes no delight in the saints?

³ As for the saints who are in the land, they are the noble ones in whom is all my delight.

If some of your delight is in God and some of your delight is in people, you have split apart what should not be split apart. The goal is to have 100% of your delight in people in such a way that all that delight is really delight in God.

Conclusion

If you are not involved in loving God's people through ministry in the Church, or you feel you are not doing enough, we have something that may help you with that. On TreasuringGod.com there is a section on the menu called "Community." If you click on that and then go to the "Serve in a Ministry" page you can find a long list of ministry openings at Agape. And for those of you who are already serving in ministry (which is most everyone), always double check your attitudes. Make sure you never dishonor God by serving with a "What a burden" attitude." And make all of your ministry a conscious, intentional expression of love for God by loving His people. And make sure your motive in ministry is joy in the Lord – the joy that comes through seeing people receive spiritual benefits and growth.

Benediction: Ps 100: Shout for joy to the LORD, all the earth. 2Worship the LORD with gladness; come before him with joyful songs. 3Know that the LORD is God. It is he who made us, and we are his; we are his people, the sheep of his pasture. 4Enter his gates with thanksgiving and his courts with praise; give thanks to him and praise his name. 5For the LORD is good and his love endures forever; his faithfulness continues through all generations.

Devotionals

Joy in God

1 John 1:4 Day 1

1 John 1:4 We are writing these things so that our joy may be complete.

Dear Lord God, joy in you is better than anything this world offers. I would rather have the joy that comes from nearness to You than to be rid of all my suffering and weakness and pain. Teach me, dear Lord, how to have joy in You through loving Your people. When I read about Your heaven-shaking delight in the spiritual progress of Your people, if I really believed what I was reading, and if I deeply loved You, it would make me want nothing more than to do some ministry that would be an occasion for You to have that kind of joy over the spiritual progress that happened in someone's life through my ministry. But I hardly have that drive, dear God. Something is missing. Is it that my soul is not convinced of the truth of the passages that talk about the extremes of Your joy in the progress of Your people? Is it that I just don't have enough love for You? Is it that I have fallen into a pattern of ministry that is not done with a conscious goal of doing that which delights You? Is it all three? Search me, Oh God, and know my heart. Try me and know my thoughts and motives and attitudes and affections. See what it is that prevents Your servant from fullness of joy in loving Your people.

Maybe part of the problem is my failure to appreciate the greatness of what is accomplished when ministry is carried out. False humility would have me engage in ministry and then be pessimistic about its effectiveness. "It probably didn't do them much good." Doing that not only slanders the work of Your Spirit in my life, but it short-circuits the process of joy. Protect my joy, dear God, from the false humility of my flesh that wants to downplay the very works of Your Spirit in my life.

Attribute to behold, desire, experience & enjoy: The God who gives joy to the human soul

Promise to trust: He will fill me with joy if I love Him and His people

What will result if I experience this attribute today: Joy!

Joy in God

1 John 1:4 Day 2

1 John 1:4 We are writing these things so that our joy may be complete.

God delivers His grace and the goodness of His presence to us in many ways – sometimes directly, and sometimes through earthly pleasures, such as sleep, companionship, food, sex, etc. The joy we receive from those things does not really come from those things – it comes from the presence of God through those things. We tend to think that the joy we get from people and events is supplied by those people and events. If you have a lot of joy after a day of skiing, you assume it was the skiing that caused the joy. It wasn't. It was the favorable presence of God. That is why you can ski another day on the same slopes under the same conditions and walk away with no joy and with your soul unsatisfied. The same goes for all your favorite activities and favorite people. None of them can guarantee joy and satisfaction because joy and satisfaction only come *from* God, and they only come *through* those things when God decides to grant closeness to His favorable presence through those things.

Psalm 43:3 Send forth your light and your truth, let them guide me; let them bring me to your holy mountain, to the place where you dwell. ⁴ Then will I go to the altar of God, to God, the joy of my rejoicing. I will praise you with the harp, O God, my God. ⁵ Why are you downcast, O my soul? Why so disturbed within me? Put your hope in God, for I will yet praise him, my Savior and my God.

The psalmist calls God “the joy of my rejoicing.” All rejoicing in life – whether it comes from a ski trip or an afternoon with your best friend or a worship service or a good, satisfying meal – the source of any joy that comes through those things is God. He is the joy of all our rejoicing.

What is wonderful about this attribute:

If the source of joy were people and earthly pleasures we would not have access to joy much of the time. There are times when you cannot afford to go skiing, or your best friend is not available, or you do not have time to engage in your favorite activity. Furthermore, if earthly pleasures were the source of joy, then in those times when the earthly pleasures do not bring joy and leave you unsatisfied, there would be no hope for joy at all. What is wonderful about the fact that God is the source of all joy is 1) His presence is always available, and 2) there is never a time when it will not satisfy. Scripture promises amazing things to those who experience the presence of God.

Experiencing this attribute:

Every time you ever experience any joy of any kind, remember that the source of that joy is the presence of God. That feeling of happiness is a sample of what His presence is like, and a more direct experience of His presence would result in a more intense sensation of joy. Remember: pleasure is a

picture, designed to teach us how to delight in God (and pain is a hunger pang – designed to teach us to hunger and thirst for God). Learn to use all the pleasures of life to train your soul to love the presence of God, and all the pain of life to learn to crave that presence more.

The psalmist asks God to send forth His light and truth. That is the only way into God's presence. You experience God's presence only when your eyes are opened to what is so marvelous about some truth in Scripture. This requires diligent study, extended meditation, and earnest prayer, as only God can open the eyes of the heart. Unbelievers can understand the meaning of the words, but they cannot cause their hearts to delight in that meaning. Figuring out the context and syntax of all the sentences, by itself, will not thrill the heart in God. The meaning communicated by those sentences must lead the reader to God's dwelling place.

Father, let all my religion be a seeking after fellowship with You. May I never pray, read or study or memorize Your Word, preach, counsel, serve, write, evangelize, fellowship, or anything else unless it is a seeking after communion with You. Don't let my Christianity become mechanistic.

Recall in your mind some reason for rejoicing, and consider the fact that the joy came only from God. Imagine the exact same event without any joy at all and teach your soul that that is what it would have been like without the presence of God.

Attribute to behold, desire, experience & enjoy: The God who gives joy to the human soul

Promise to trust: He will fill me with joy if I love Him and His people

What will result if I experience this attribute today: Joy!

Joy in God

1 John 1:4 Day 3

1 John 1:4 We are writing these things so that our joy may be complete.

If earthly pleasures are enjoyed without reference to God, they become idolatry. But if they are enjoyed as an expression of God's love, the very enjoyment of them is pleasing and acceptable worship that honors God.

1 Timothy 6:17 Command those who are rich in this present world ... to put their hope in God, who richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment.

Psalm 73:25-28 Whom have I in heaven but you? And earth has nothing I desire besides you. 26 My flesh and my heart may fail, but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever. 28 For behold, those who are far from you will perish; you destroy all who commit adultery against you. 28 But as for me, the nearness of God is my good; I have made the Lord Yahweh my refuge, That I may tell of all Your works.

The psalmists who spoke of God as their only desire, and who said there is nothing else on earth they wanted, also spoke of numerous other desires. They desired water when they were thirsty and rest when they were tired and a thousand other earthly pleasures. If their only desire was for God alone, and yet they desired earthly pleasures, then they must have found a way for their desire for earthly pleasures to be expressions of their single desire for God alone. So instead of desiring food plus God, their desire for food was part of their desire for God. The same was true for every other earthly desire.

Should we enjoy earthly pleasures? If so, how much? Should we be careful not to enjoy or desire them too much? Imagine a woman whose husband is at war overseas. When he sends her a letter, does

he want her to be excited when she sees the mailman approaching her house? It depends. If she is excited to see the mailman because she knows he is carrying a letter from her husband, then yes – the more excited she is the more her husband is honored and loved. However if she is excited because she is interested in the mailman himself, and pays no attention to the letter from her husband, that would be adulterous and would grieve her husband. We can think of every earthly pleasure (that is not forbidden in Scripture) as a mailman carrying a message from our Husband in heaven. If we become enamored with the mailman (the earthly pleasure itself), we commit adultery/idolatry. But if our hearts are thrilled at the sight of the mailman because of how much we love the Sender of the message – if we enjoy that earthly pleasure because we recognize it as an letter from heaven that reads, “I love you, and here is a sample of My love,” then the more we enjoy that sample the more we honor God. It is wrong to use God as a means to gaining earthly pleasures. But it is a good thing to use earthly pleasures as a means of enjoying God.

What is wonderful about this attribute:

What is wonderful about this attribute, then, is the fact that God does not call us to self-denial for the sake of self-denial. There are plenty of times God calls us to self-denial – to give up various earthly pleasures. But He only calls us to do that in contexts where those earthly pleasures lead toward ruin. Some religious systems promote the denial of earthly pleasures as a virtue in and of itself. They forbid people to marry, order them to abstain from certain foods or to fast, etc. Such religious teachings are harshly rebuked in Scripture.

1 Timothy 4:1-5 The Spirit clearly says that in later times some will abandon the faith and follow deceiving spirits and things taught by demons. ² Such teachings come through hypocritical liars, whose consciences have been seared as with a hot iron. ³ They forbid people to marry and order them to abstain from certain foods, which God created to be received with thanksgiving by those who believe and who know the truth. ⁴ For everything God created is good, and nothing is to be rejected if it is received with thanksgiving, ⁵ because it is consecrated by the word of God and prayer.

Remaining single or abstaining from food can be a very good thing in certain contexts, but to simply promote them across the board as though God were somehow pleased when we reject His good gifts and make life hard on ourselves is to paint an ugly (and false) picture of what God is like.

When we indulge in earthly pleasures with our back to God - without thinking of Him, but enjoying the pleasure *instead* of Him - that is evil. But when we see that pleasure as an expression of His love such that our hearts respond with gratitude toward Him, that “consecrates” that pleasure and makes it a holy thing (v.5). How different God is from the gods of the false religions! He provides countless earthly pleasures and then invites us to enjoy Him through them!

We must learn to enjoy God’s presence through His presents. The purpose of His gifts is for us to use them to experience His grace and nearness. The earthly pleasure is like the box and the wrapping paper. The gift is the favorable presence of God and the grace we receive through that. Do not be like a baby who is more interested in the box and the wrapping paper than the gift. Be like an adult, who appreciates the paper and is thrilled at the sight of the box, but only because of a faith and confidence in the goodness of the giver that assures that something wonderful is in the box! The food you will eat today is not the gift. It is the box. Enjoyment of your family is not the message from heaven – it is the mailman.

Our idolatry-prone hearts so easily fall off the horse on one side or the other – either failing to see the goodness of the gift so that we have no great response of love to the Giver, or falling in love with the packaging/mailman while ignoring the Giver. At the natural level those appear to be opposites – not getting excited about the gift/message or getting very excited about the gift/message; but they are really exactly the same thing – an ignoring of the Giver/Sender.

Oh dear Lord, when I think of how many messages I receive everyday from heaven in the form of fulfillments of my desires, how can I miss the message? How is it that my soul is not so elated with joy every moment of every day that I would frequently burst into shouts and song? How can I go hours at a time without communing with the blessed Author of all these messages? How could I prefer writing a paper or studying or listening to a game or thinking about some inane thing to communion with my blessed Savior?

Is most of the happiness in your life worship or idolatry?

Attribute to behold, desire, experience & enjoy: The God who gives joy to the human soul

Promise to trust: He will fill me with joy if I love Him and His people

What will result if I experience this attribute today: Joy!

Joy in God

1 John 1:4 Day 4

1 John 1:4 We are writing these things so that our joy may be complete.

Psalm 73:25-28 Whom have I in heaven but you? And earth has nothing I desire besides you. 26 My flesh and my heart may fail, but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever. 28 For behold, those who are far from you will perish; you destroy all who commit adultery against you. 28 But as for me, the nearness of God is my good; I have made the Lord Yahweh my refuge, That I may tell of all Your works.

Experiencing this attribute:

How do you know if you are using God to get earthly pleasures (idolatry), or using earthly pleasures to enjoy God (worship and love)? One way to tell is to watch what happens when there is a choice between earthly pleasures or the presence of God. When the husband comes home from war, and his wife can enjoy his presence directly, she should lose interest in the mailman altogether.

This is what makes the existence of sinful pleasures useful – they present us with a clear choice so we can see what our hearts prefer. Any time a physical pleasure is connected with some sin there is a clear choice – the favorable presence of God or the earthly pleasure – choosing one means forfeiting the other.

Jonah 2:8 Those who cling to worthless idols forfeit the grace that could be theirs.

When David preferred sin with Bathsheba to closeness with God; God told David that He would have given David more and more until it was “enough” to satisfy David (2 Sam.12:8). The term “would have” is tragic. By preferring sin, David forfeited that which would have been enough to satisfy him.

So when there is a clear choice between an earthly pleasure and the presence of God, and we choose the presence of God; then we know our enjoyment of earthly pleasures is pleasing worship, and we are using them to enjoy God rather than using God to get earthly pleasures. If we prefer the earthly pleasure, then we know our enjoyment of earthly pleasures is idolatry.

How often we commit adultery/idolatry against God by desiring earthly pleasures above Him – food, physical pleasure, rest, fun, amusement, prestige, respect, interesting thoughts, pleasant company – all mailmen carrying wonderful messages about what the great Sender is like, and all things that we have committed spiritual adultery with against God – enjoying them without a thought about Him.

O Lord, forgive Your idolatrous, adulterous servant! Have mercy upon me. Don't give me over to those evil desires. Depose and crush the idols of my heart that I might be fully devoted to You. Make me

a one-desire person. Open my eyes to the truth that there exists only one desirable thing – only one reality that can actually satisfy my soul.

And let that result in an intensification of my desire, that I might be consumed with desire for You. Let every hunger pang, every sexual urge, every impulse to do or get or take anything – let all that increase my desire for You. When those desires are fulfilled, let that make me long more deeply for the Fulfiller behind them. When they are not fulfilled, let that make me long more deeply for the only One who ultimately can and will fulfill them.

Waiting on God

Psalm 33:20-21 We wait in hope for the LORD; he is our help and our shield. ²¹ In him our hearts rejoice, for we trust in his holy name

Psalm 130:5-6 I wait for the LORD, my soul waits, and in his word I put my hope. ⁶ My soul waits for the Lord more than watchmen wait for the morning, more than watchmen wait for the morning.

This matter of preferring the presence of God to earthly pleasures is where waiting on the Lord comes into the picture. In times when the presence of God can be enjoyed through some earthly pleasure – enjoy God! But in times when an earthly pleasure cannot be a means of enjoying God because there is sin attached to it, wait – wait for the Lord to come and satisfy your desires with good things. Trying to satisfy your desires through forbidden pleasures is a failure to wait. It is a turning to Hagar instead of waiting with Sarah (and the result is Ishmael rather than Isaac).

Think of what a wonderful thing it is that God calls us to wait. You might expect that when faced with some sinful pleasure He would just tell us to deny ourselves. Just say no. But instead He tells us to wait, which implies He will satisfy the desire in His way if we just look to Him and wait. We don't have to leave the desire unfulfilled!

Lord, each time I experience a desire of any kind today, let that remind me of the Object of my desire and the only Satisfier of desire. And let me enjoy being the child of such a God! Each time one of my desires is fulfilled – even if it is as small as the scratching of an itch or movement into a more comfortable position, let that remind me that the pleasure of that fulfillment is a mailman, and wrapping paper. Help me to look beyond it to the message and the gift, that my heart might be enthralled by the Giver/Sender.

And each time I have a desire that is not fulfilled, let that turn my attention to the One who is so fulfilling and desirable that He is worth waiting for. Let the intensity of my evil desires be transformed into intensity for my desire for You, as I am reminded that only You can fulfill and satisfy

What are you waiting for right now? Is your heart full of joyful anticipation, and are you refusing any substitutes?

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What will result if I experience this attribute today: Joy!

Joy in God

1 John 1:4 Day 5

1 John 1:4 We are writing these things so that our joy may be complete.

If we think of joy as being like water and our soul's craving for joy as being like thirst, the question becomes, "What is the water source?" Based on our experience it seems like the answer would be, "There are many sources – prosperity, fun with friends, good food, sex, entertainment, etc." But in reality none of those are actually *sources* of joy. God is the only source of joy, and those things are all means God tends to use to deliver joy to our souls. (This is obvious from the fact that those things can be experienced without joy.)

Imagine a set of spoons in a child's tea party set – tiny little spoons made for dolls. Each one can hold just a few drips of water. Each of the avenues of joy is like one of those spoons. A person who has never drunk directly from the glass, but has only received water through those spoons begins to think the sensation of the spoon in the mouth is what will satisfy the cravings of thirst. Whichever spoon is biggest is thought of as the greatest source of joy, and the thought of living life without that spoon seems unbearable. Since our largest helpings of water have come from that spoon we think we could never be happy if that spoon were taken away. But God wants us to understand that the spoons are not what quench our thirst – they are the bearers of the water but not the source. To teach us this God will, from time to time, put the spoon in our mouth without any water (you go on a vacation, or spend time with a friend, or whatever your favorite spoon happens to be; and you walk away unsatisfied and without joy in your heart).

When you are really, really thirsty, the deepest satisfaction comes from drinking large gulps of water directly from the glass. Drinking from a doll's spoon is better than nothing, but at the same time it is frustrating, because you can never seem to get enough water to fully satisfy. All the pleasures of life should be tastes that drive us to want to drink directly from the glass (receive joy directly from times of sweet communion and fellowship with God).

Psalm 4:7 You have filled my heart with greater joy than when their grain and new wine abound.

In an agricultural society, grain and new wine abounding equals prosperity. For our culture it would be like saying "You have filled me with greater joy than when they have more money than they know what to do with." Wealth can be a relatively deep doll spoon, but drinking from the glass is far better.

Psalm 43:4 Then will I go to the altar of God, to God, the joy of my rejoicing

God is the joy of my rejoicing. When I get water from any spoon that makes me happy, the happiness comes not from the spoon but from the little bit of water (grace from God) that is in the spoon.

Psalm 63:3 Because your love is better than life, my lips will glorify you.

Life at its best (marriage, family, recreation, wealth, sex, fun, food, etc.) is doll spoons with drips of water. God's love is the big, tall glass. The glass is better than the spoons.

Habakkuk 3:17-19 Though the fig tree does not bud and there are no grapes on the vines, though the olive crop fails and the fields produce no food, though there are no sheep in the pen and no cattle in the stalls, ¹⁸ yet I will rejoice in the LORD, I will be joyful in God my Savior. ¹⁹ The Sovereign LORD is my strength; he makes my feet like the feet of a deer, he enables me to go on the heights.

Even if you took all the spoons away from me, if I could still drink from the glass I would be fully satisfied.

Isaiah 9:3 You have enlarged the nation and increased their joy; they rejoice before you as people rejoice at the harvest, as men rejoice when dividing the plunder.

You, God (the glass), have given them joy that is every bit as great as when they drink from all their favorite spoons.

What is wonderful about this attribute:

People in the world have to live in constant fear that they might lose their favorite spoons. And on those days when all their favorite spoons have no water in them they have the hopeless despair that comes from longing and aching for joy and being utterly powerless to attain it, as well as the fear that perhaps they will never be able to attain it. But the child of God always has access to the Glass. It is not easy access, or automatic access; and often when tipping that glass to get a drink we have to tip for a long time before the water comes to our mouths (God wants to know if we will wait for Him or give up and turn to some cherished spoon), but the promise is that if we keep seeking we *will* receive the water in soul-satisfying measures that are greater than what we can get from any spoon. We never have to live with the fear: “*Perhaps joy is going to be unattainable for me.*” Nor do we have to grasp all our spoons and spend all our energy guarding them and all our resources attaining more and more new spoons. We are free from the anxiety of having the guard our access to joy and from the worry that perhaps that access will be lost. What a delightful way to live!

Lord, when I am reminded of things I want but can't afford, remind me that You are the Vendor that sells for free. Let me enjoy the fact that what I need from You is NEVER out of my reach. I'm NEVER in a position where I can't get it. Oh, thank You dear Lord!

Experiencing this attribute:

Sipping from the spoons is crucial in order to build up enough desire so that I will drink deeply. But it only works if with each sip I remind my soul that what is wonderful and satisfying about that sip is not the spoon, but the drips of water that are in the spoon. The purpose of sipping is not complete satisfaction. It is to train the soul to realize that full, deep satisfaction will only come from big, deep, full gulps out of the glass. A life of only tasting will be a life of dissatisfaction and frustration.

Set aside some extended times to be alone with God. Take your Bible, a notebook, some worship music, and a variety of good devotionals that open your eyes to what is wonderful about God. Find a comfortable, quiet place. Pour out your heart to God. Read a Psalm as slowly as you can – searching for glimpses of God's glory and goodness like a woman searching every square inch of her house for a lost wedding ring. Write a psalm – a carefully crafted, well thought out prayer that expresses the longing in your heart to drink directly from the glass. Listen to some worship songs. And stay there for as long as it takes until you actually experience the nearness of God and the joy and satisfaction of soul that He has promised we can find if we seek it with all our heart. There are no rules for how long you have to remain at a buffet, but it is crazy to leave before you are full! Don't leave your place of prayer until you have enjoyed fellowship with God. Don't get up until you have felt the joy of communion with Him - until you have actually been moved by His Spirit, the Spirit of adoption – the Spirit of wisdom and revelation who enables you to know Him in a deeper way.

Then spend the day tasting the little samples of His goodness in every earthly pleasure you experience so that you will build up enough thirst to really seek hard after Him in your next extended prayer time. Make every moment of your life one of two activities: either tasting (that which generates or increases desire for the Him), or feasting (that which satisfies desire). The satisfaction comes when you experience one of God's attributes with an acute awareness of His favorable presence.

No time to fit a regular schedule of seeking hard after God in an extended time of prayer? What are you doing in your life that is so important that it cannot be adjusted to make room for this?

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