

“The Fruit of the Spirit: Joy”

(Galatians 5.22-23a)

Psalm 65:5-13; Isaiah 35:1-10; John 16:16-24

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The Fruit of the Spirit is ... *joy*. It is that feeling of deep gladness, great delight, good cheer, that arises within your heart when you just feel really, really *good* about something. The birth of a child, falling in love, getting that dream job, or that coveted place on the team; *something really good is happening*, and your heart resounds with jubilant rejoicing. That’s joy.

Joy is the second in Paul’s list of nine fruits that come from the Holy Spirit. He takes something that *anybody* – of any faith persuasion – can experience, and attributes it to the work of the Spirit of God. Joy is not an exclusively Christian phenomenon. The Greek word for “joy” is just an ordinary word, used by poets and philosophers alike. Yet Paul takes it and puts it into an explicitly Christian context.

Why? Because the center of our joy, as Christians, is in Jesus Christ. You remember that song – *I’ve got the joy, joy, joy, joy down in my heart, down in my heart, down in my heart; I’ve got the joy, joy, joy, joy down in my heart, down in my heart to stay ... and I’m so happy, so very happy; I’ve got the love of Jesus in my heart; and I’m so happy, so very happy; I’ve got the love of Jesus in my heart!*

Scripture is full of references to the *joy* that Jesus brings. The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field, says Jesus, and when someone finds it, *in his joy* he sells all that he has and buys the field (Matthew 13:44) ... “I bring you good tidings of *great joy*,” says the angel to the shepherds, “for unto you is born in the city of David a Savior” (Luke 2:10-11) ... when the wise men see the star over the place where Jesus is, they rejoice *with great joy* (Matthew 2:10) ... the women leave the empty tomb in great joy, running to tell the disciples that Jesus is alive (Matthew 28:8) ... Philip preaches the gospel in Samaria, and there was *great joy* in that city (Acts 8:8) ... “the disciples were *filled with joy* and with the Holy Spirit” (Acts 13:52) ... there’s something about *Jesus*, that is cause for great celebration.

And we feel that, right, when we first commit our lives to Jesus; when we find that treasure in the field, when we realize just how much we *need* to turn our lives toward God, how much *happier* we are, in a true and deep sense, when we follow Jesus, rather than our own inclinations. We’ve found something precious, something special, that our lives have been missing, something that our lives are better *with* than *without*. We have found our home in God, and it is a *good* home indeed.

But here's the thing: *things change*. Our feelings about Jesus don't always stay as strong as they once were. We start to lose that feeling of deep connection with the Holy Spirit. *Life happens*. There's an accident. There's strain in your marriage. You get robbed. Somebody takes advantage of you. Somebody *hurts* you. Your body develops a debilitating condition. You feel like no one loves you. Work becomes less and less meaningful or more and more frustrating. Your income takes a nosedive. You get that dreaded diagnosis. *Life happens*. It happens to all of us, at some time or another, and it can suck away our joy. It's no longer *I've got the joy, joy, joy, joy down in my heart ... it's now, Lord, help me!*

Sometimes we do a disservice to our children and youth when they're growing up in the faith; sometimes, we might give them the impression that all you need to do is believe in Jesus, and your life's going to be perfectly happy, you're always going to feel great, and even if adversity comes, you've got Jesus, and that's all you need. That's *close* to the truth ... but it's not quite the truth. You and I both know lots of people who are Christians and who have had to deal with tons of suffering. Pain, loss, hardship, abuse, the list goes on. Depression hits Christians just as much as it hits non-Christians – but Christians are often ashamed or embarrassed to admit it, because *isn't Jesus supposed to be enough?*

Don't get me wrong here. There is a *huge* benefit, huge *joy*, that comes from having Christ at the center of your life. Waking up in the morning and knowing without a shadow of a doubt who you really want to serve in this world, whose feet you really want to bow down to. Inviting the Holy Spirit into your life, seeking the Spirit's guidance and direction, doing *the right thing*. Praying for other people, or for yourself. Isn't it a blessing that we have someone to pray to? What a *joy* we have in Jesus!

Jesus never told his disciples that the Christian life would be a life without suffering. "I assure you," he says, "you will cry and lament." (John 16:20) In context, he was talking about how his disciples would feel when he died. "You will be sorrowful, but your sorrow will be turned into joy." The disciples were about to weep and mourn – but *Jesus*, and *joy*, were on the other side. Our context is a little bit different – Jesus has died, he's with God, he's sent the Spirit to be with us, until he comes again. We are still awaiting our full reunion with Jesus. He's with us now, but how much *more* will he be with us, on the other side, when the kingdom comes, when Christ returns on the clouds of heaven, when we go to our eternal home. There's a reunion that's going to occur, in our future, and it is going to be a *joyful*.

But how do we find joy in the meantime, in the midst of all the suffering and adversity in life?

Well, there's *hope*, for one thing. Knowing, without a shadow of a doubt, that this story is going to have a *good* ending. A *satisfying, meaningful, fulfilling* ending. No one enjoys reading a book if the ending's just going to be miserable, if everyone's just going to die, and that's it, there's nothing more, nothing to *hope* for, nothing satisfying at the end. Every good story has its share of adversity, something for the heroes to overcome; here we are, in this *Christian* story, and it's filled with adversity too ... but the *Hero* has overcome. The *victory* is coming, the *final* victory; evil and sin and suffering and death are all going to be banished away; we *know* that to be true. We go through our days, enduring the hardships, but *holding onto the hope of a brighter tomorrow*. That *hope* can give us *joy*.

Is that all? What else can we do, while we wait for Jesus to right all that's wrong in the world?

Here's what we can do: we can *find the things in life that bring us joy ... and pursue them.*

What brings you joy? I mean, really? What puts a smile on your face? Watching children play on a playground? Going for a walk in the park on a summer's day? Enjoying a beautiful sunset over Lake Michigan? Taking a hike through the woods? Looking at rocks, or minerals, or plants, or animals – the beautiful things in this world? Playing a sport? Reading a good book?

We live in a world where there are a lot of pressures coming at us from every direction. Pressure from work, from school, from family, from church (sometimes church is the worst culprit of all) ... pressure to perform, pressure to be your best, pressure to *look* your best ... pressure from all those phone calls and emails and text messages ... pressure to keep up with all the bills and paperwork and seemingly endless things we have to do to keep our households functioning well. Some of this pressure is reasonable. Some of it is not. In a world where pressure is coming at us *constantly* from all directions, *we have to be intentional about finding our joy.* God designed our hearts so there are things in life that put a genuine smile on our face, that bring us that feeling of deep gladness. *What brings that feeling of deep joy into your heart? What feeds your soul? And are you getting enough of it in life?*

I've got a friend who enjoys spending time in her garden. It brings her a peace and joy. It's one of the ways she feels connected to God. She also has a lawn that needs to be mowed. She concluded this past summer that it was worth it to spend twenty bucks to pay someone else to mow her lawn so that she could spend that time in her garden, doing something that *feeds her soul.* It's brought her a greater sense of happiness; it gives her more to look forward to when she comes home from work; it's making the rest of her life more enjoyable because she's *receiving* from God in a way that God designed her to receive. It might not be gardening for you. It might be cooking, or playing games, or just chillin' in the evening on your porch, watching the leaves turn. *You need to know what brings you joy, what feeds your soul.* And if you feel like your life is becoming consumed by too many tasks, too many things on your "to-do" list, too many demands, too much drudgery, *you need to make a point of carving out time to increase your joy.* Put it on your "to-do" list if you need to, and don't feel guilty about it. Honestly, it might be more important than many of the other things you do, because it will help *sustain* you through all the things on your list. If you're not getting enough *joy* in your life, you're going to feel anxious, and frustrated; you're going to be irritable, less pleasant to be around; you're going to end up taking joy away from other people because *you're* not experiencing enough of it yourself. Take this as far as you need to. I've heard several stories in the last few years of people who have quit jobs that had had been sucking the life out of them, to start up their own business, doing something they truly *love* to do, things that *God created them to do*, things that *feed their souls.* I'm not saying that everyone needs to do that – but *some people might.* God did not create us to be mindless automatons, doing things that don't bring us any happiness or fulfillment simply because we need a paycheck. God gave us *hearts*, and if there are a lot of activities in life that are killing our hearts – well, it's time to make some changes.

Because *God wants us to feel joy.* Joy doesn't just *happen.* Sometimes, it *needs to be pursued.*

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