

Sermon: 1-10-21 Fruit of the Spirit: Joy
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Do you recall the old Disney movie, “Song of the South”? I am told that the movie is no longer considered politically correct, but you may remember a scene from that movie where Uncle Remus is strolling through the countryside; a blue bird is flitting on and off of his shoulder; the sun is shining down; and he is singing, “Zip A Dee Do Dah”. I can’t help but smile when I think of that scene? Let’s watch a bit of it.

<https://youtu.be/6bWyhj7siEY> (0:00 to 0:56)

Wouldn’t it be great if every day the sun was shining, the birds were singing, and you didn’t have a care in the world? Wouldn’t it be great if every day was filled with joy? But we know better. Not every day is joy filled. Storms come. Birds fly south. Some days are clouded by worries, disappointments, and fears. Some days it is very, very hard to feel joy. Yet, in 1 Thessalonians (5:16-18) we are instructed, **“Rejoice always, pray continually, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is God’s will for you in Christ Jesus.”** But how can we do that? How can we rejoice always? How is that even possible?

That is the question that we will be asking today as we look at the second fruit of the Spirit, joy. But let’s start by reminding ourselves what the fruit of the Spirit is. Paul writes, **“The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. Against such things there is no law.” — Galatians 5:22-23**

You may recall from last week that we are doing a sermon series on the fruit of the Spirit. This fruit is both the result and evidence of the Holy Spirit’s work in our lives. This fruit is what lets us and others know both who and whose we are. For, just as an **apple tree produces apples** and a pear tree produces pears, a Spirit filled Christian will produce love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. However, this analogy only goes so far. For an apple tree is incapable of producing pears. It either produces apples or nothing. However, God gives us, as Christians, a certain amount of choice in what we produce. Certainly, God created us to produce the fruit of the Spirit. That is how we were created to live. It is also certain that the only way to live as we were intended to live is by walking with the Spirit. But, unlike the

apple tree, God has given us the freedom to choose to follow or turn away from the Spirit, thereby denying who we were meant to be. Sadly, too many choose to follow their lusts instead of the Spirit who produces good fruit.

Last week, we looked at the choice to love. The Spirit calls us and equips us to seek our neighbor's highest good and to set aside our own wants and desires in order to meet the needs of others. That self-giving love, that the Spirit equips us to share, is the first of the fruits.

Today, we will look at the second fruit, joy. God asks us, no tells us, to lives of joy. But how can we do that? That's an important question. Because God commands us to rejoice in all things. Indeed, no command is repeated more often in the Bible. In preparing for this sermon, I read that we are told to rejoice 330 times. But what does that mean? What does it mean to rejoice?

Maybe I should begin by pointing out what it does not mean. Paul is not talking about happiness. Many people equate joy with happiness. When life is going well, when they feel happy, they say that they are joyful. Conversely, when things are not going well, when they feel unhappy, they would not think of claiming to be joyful. However, unlike happiness, which can be fleeting, the joy Paul talks about is always available. It is not dependent on our circumstances.

Let me see if I can illustrate. Take a moment and think of two or three things that would bring you joy. What is on your list? A few years back, I led a youth retreat at which I asked the kids what would bring them joy. They listed things like winning the upcoming game, a hot car, good grades, money, a new phone, boys, girls, graduating and moving away, etc. Are any of those things on your list? Maybe a car, a bigger house, a raise in pay, losing weight, better health, a new love, or maybe freedom from an old love. Can you guess the most common answer to the question, "What would bring you joy?" It is **winning the lottery**. People say, "If only I could win the lottery, then my troubles would be over. Then I would find joy."

Tellingly, the columnist, Jim Bishop conducted a survey in which he asked lottery winners how winning had impacted their lives. The first winner he interviewed was Rosa Grayson, from right here in the state of Washington. Once an outgoing woman, Rosa told him that she no longer left her

apartment. She lives in hiding, trying to avoid those who are seeking to take advantage of her. She responded, "Everyone wants something of me. People are so mean."

When the McGuarts of New York won, they were ecstatic. Life had not been easy. Dad and the boys were stuck in dead end jobs, going nowhere. Then Dad won the lottery and kindly split the winnings with his boys. At the time, they told the media that winning would not change them or their family. Yet, within a year everything changed. The boys were no longer speaking to their father. Mom had left Pop, because she said that, "He was hogging the polk." By the end of the next year, they had all been charged with tax evasion. Mom called the lottery, "The Devil's money."

Contrary to what many think, the lottery did not bring lasting joy. Momentary happiness, maybe, but not lasting joy. Neither will beauty or fame or success or any of the other things most people think would bring them joy. Sting, one of the most successful rock stars of my generation, was once asked, "What is the most widely held misconceptions about success?" He answered, "That it brings happiness. It doesn't, and I don't think anything does. I have massive success and no friends." The problem with attributing joy to life circumstances is that circumstances, even the best circumstances, don't last.

Of course, God never promised they would. I have seen too many people accept Christ and start coming to church, because they believed that, if they did, everything would work out in their lives. God would shield them from problems, and they would live "happily ever after." Usually, they are happy for a while, but then troubles come. Their bubble bursts. And they feel that God has let them down.

However, God never promised "happily ever after". He promised joy not happiness. God never promised that we would be spared from the troubles that others experience. Indeed, the same Paul who wrote that we should rejoice always, also recorded a list of troubles, that few of us would care to share. If you read the book of Acts, you will soon learn that Paul experienced rejection and hunger. He was beaten, imprisoned, shipwrecked, and wracked by disease. Indeed, as he penned the command to rejoice always, he was in prison, betrayed by Christian friends, awaiting his death. Obviously, joy, for Paul, was not dependent on life circumstances.

Joy for Paul was real, but it did not arise out of what was happening around him. Paul's joy came from what was happening within him. Joy was a gift that the Spirit gave him. More than that, joy was life itself. It was what he was created for, as essential as the air he breathed.

God created us to be in relationship with him. And it is only in that relationship, only when we are opening ourselves up to the presence of the Spirit, that we will be fulfilled. And it is this fulfilling relationship that brought Paul joy. We all need joy. We were created for joy. But without the Spirit, we will never fully experience it.

Which means that when joy is missing, we crave it. And when we can't find it, we try to substitute other things that we hope might fill that need. We look for joy in sex, in money, in food, in shopping, in drugs and alcohol. We think that they will bring joy because they once made us happy, for a while. The thing is that the happiness and the satisfaction it brings is temporary, at best. It doesn't last and if it doesn't last, it is a pretty poor substitute for joy.

It makes no sense to settle for temporary substitutes. We need the real thing, the joy that walking with the Spirit brings. Joy is not just a nice addition to life, it is a deep, essential need. I once heard a doctor tell an interviewer that lack of joy in people's lives was the biggest single contributor to disease and hospitalization. The doctor argued that a lack of joy weakens our immune systems, leaving us susceptible to illness and hindering our body's ability to recover. We need joy.

So where can we find this joy, that we need and crave and so many fail to find? The first, and easiest, answer is that it is a gift from God. It is a fruit of living a Spirit-filled life. We receive joy when we spend time walking with God and allowing the Spirit to lead us. Joy is a gift, but like any gift, we have to accept it and make use of it.

Why then, if joy is so needed and so easy to obtain, do so many live joyless, frustrated lives? Why, when so many are seeking it, do so few actually find and experience it? Milton expressed the refusal of so many to accept God's gift of joy by arguing that they had made the choice that it was, "**Better to reign in Hell** than serve in Heaven." Whether out of pride or fear or stubborn independence many are unwilling to turn over control of their lives to the Spirit, even when it is their best hope of finding joy.

You question why they would do that. Well, think of the willful child who would rather stay in their room and miss both TV and supper than humble themselves and say they are sorry.

For, though joy is a gift, we have to accept it and open ourselves up to it. And opening ourselves up to it requires humbling ourselves and releasing control to the guiding presence of the Spirit. This means that we need to make the decision to spend time with God. We need to seek to grow deeper in our relationship. We need to obey God. I don't know about you, but I never experience joy more fully than when I am walking with God and growing in my love of Christ. It also helps, as we discussed last week, if we practice saying "No" to self, and "Yes" to serving others.

In my experience, few things help me escape the struggle of daily living and bring more joy than intentionally serving others. That was one of my great discoveries on my first mission trip. I traveled with a team to Nicaragua, to a village that had been devastated by a hurricane. We slept on the ground and worked in 90% humidity under the equatorial sun. Food was short and we went almost a week without taking a shower. We should have been miserable, but we discovered, in sacrificing to meet the needs of those villagers, a joy that we seldom experienced in our daily lives.

People ask, "Why would I give up my vacation and spend my hard-earned money to go on a mission trip where I will be asked to work ten hours a day in difficult conditions? Where is the joy in that?" All I can say is that I have rarely experienced more joy than I did when I released my daily responsibilities and control and placed my trust in God by serving in the mission field. It is true. I have been on trips to Disneyland and taken a cruise. Don't get me wrong. They were fun. But they did not bring the joy that I received while serving God. These days, I feel a similar joy on Wednesday afternoons when I volunteer with our curbside ministry.

Joy is not something we can buy or create or even seek. Joy grows out of walking with the Spirit and giving our lives in service to God and others.

A fascinating study on the principles underlying the Golden Rule was conducted by Bernard Rimland, the Director of the Institute for Child Behavior. Rimland found that the most joy filled people were those who helped others. Each person in the study was asked to list the ten people

they knew best and to label them as either happy or unhappy. They were then asked to go through the list of names again labeling them as selfish or unselfish. Rimland found that those “whose activities are devoted to bringing themselves happiness are far less likely to be happy than those whose efforts are devoted to making others happy.”

Joy does not come from focusing on our daily problems and trying to fix them. It does not even come from chasing after happiness. Joy comes when we focus instead on the eternal things that really matter. Ask yourselves, what are the things that are worrying you and stealing your joy? Then ask how much they matter in light of God’s eternal plan? My guess is that they are really not that big of a deal. They matter little in terms of what God has planned for your future. So, let them go and focus instead on the things of God, the things that truly matter, the things that bring joy.

Choose joy. That’s right. We can choose joy. One of the great secrets of life is that our joy is not dependent on what happens around us. Joy is a matter of choice. We will never find joy by seeking it. Don’t make the mistake that too many people make of confusing the byproduct with the source. Because they yearn for joy, many devote their lives to trying to find it. The problem is that you can spend your whole life chasing after joy and never find it. Joy is not something we can find. Joy is a byproduct not a source. Seeking to produce joy is a bit like polishing a light bulb in an effort to make it shine. The light may come from the bulb, but in order to make it shine, we need to connect it to the source of the power that lights it. In order to experience joy, we need to seek the source that brings it and that source is the Spirit. Thus, the only way to obtain lasting joy is by opening ourselves up to the Spirit and following where he leads. It is like Matthew says, “If we seek, we will find”, but only if we seek the source of the joy, and that of course is the Spirit.

So, I guess we can say that Paul was right when he told us we could choose joy. Remember this is not the same as seeking happiness, which as the preacher Ecclesiastes reminds us only leads to vanity and disappointment. Instead, choose to grow deeper with God and walk in the Spirit, and a byproduct of that choice will be the joy we all long for.

Oh, and one more thing, Paul reminds us that if we seek God and choose joy, then we will receive another gift most of us long for. We are told that the peace of Christ, which passes all understanding, will guard our hearts,

but that is the topic for next week, when we will look at the third fruit of the Spirit - peace.

For this week, we will add one more word to the verse we are memorizing. What word is that? It is joy, of course. **“The fruit of the Spirit is love and joy.” — Galatians 5:22**