



JOY

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We went to the Todd Beamer High School Open House this week. This year is our first venture into the big bad world of public high school, so we were looking forward to getting to know some of the teachers a bit and finding our way around. I'm pretty sure several people must have thought Karin and I were students, because there is no way we could possibly look old enough to have a kid there.

We were walking down one of the halls when I noticed a wall covered with sticky notes. Some of you know that I have kind of an obsession with sticky notes. They are the key to my sophisticated organizational system. So naturally, I needed to stop and see what this wall was all about.

One of the teachers had posted big sheets of paper on the wall with questions. Students were then asked to jot down a response on a sticky note and put it up on the wall. One question in particular caught my eye. It said, "What are you hoping tomorrow will bring?" There were the predictable answers. "Success." "Lots of money." "A good grade." But what struck me the most was how many students had just written one short word, and that was joy.

Joy. Now I might expect that in a Sunday School class, but not on the wall of a public high school. And yet there it was – not just one sticky note, but many. From my quick tally, it was by far the most popular answer.

Everybody would like a little joy in their lives, and that's the topic I'd like to spend some time looking at this morning. We are working our way through the fruit of the Spirit, one bite at a time, and joy is right there near the top. Here again is the list Paul gave us:

Galatians 5:22-23

But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. Against such things there is no law.

We've said our goal is fusion – finding a way to blend faith and life to the point where our Christianity works through every corner of our lives. To me, Joy is one of the most exciting fruit of the Spirit because it is such a marker of faith, and it is so compelling when people see it in your lives.

If you've ever read the book *The Horse and His Boy* from *The Chronicles of Narnia*, you might remember the scene where the young boy Shasta gets to the city of Tashbaan. He keeps getting bumped and pushed aside in the streets to make way for the Calormene officials and royalty. They are all stern and dark and slightly annoyed with the world. But then suddenly a group of Narnians come through. Here's how the scene is described.

Shasta had never seen anyone like them before....Their tunics were of fine, bright hardy colors, woodland green, or yellow or fresh blue. And instead of being grave and mysterious like most Calormenes, they walked with a swing and let their arms and shoulders go free, and chatted and laughed. One was whistling. You could see that they were ready to be friends with anyone who was friendly and didn't give a fig for anyone who wasn't. Shasta thought he had never seen anything so lovely in his life.

That's what I imagine it would be like if we as Christians fully embodied the joy that is ours through the Holy Spirit. Nobody would have ever seen anything so lovely, so refreshingly different. Because as much as people seem to want joy in their lives, it's awfully hard to find and keep in this world. Other than Christ, I don't see a whole lot of leaders out there promising joy.

Our constitution guarantees us the right to pursue happiness, but it doesn't say anything about joy. And the funny thing is, the more we try to chase happiness, the further off real joy seems to be. Just read the book of Ecclesiastes sometime to see somebody who pursued happiness to the end and said it was like chasing after the wind. Those of us who have tried that for ourselves know what he's talking about.

And yet God says joy is ours for the taking when the Holy Spirit is in our lives. And like the rest of the fruit, we can cultivate more of it.

At this point I would normally launch into a discussion of what our joy can look like and how to help it grow. But as I was thinking about how to dive into this topic, I kept coming back to one truth, and that is this:

God gives us joy because he is joyful.

How do you think of God? If you really stopped to consider it for a moment, I'm guessing you wouldn't normally have chosen joyful as a description. Maybe loving. But often we also picture God as stern or angry or solemn.

Look at how Jesus is typically played in film and you get the same idea. He's always got almost a blank stare, he speaks slowly and seriously, and strangely enough, usually has a British accent.

That's why I love The Visual Bible's video of Matthew. Bruce Marchiano consciously decided to do a different take on Jesus. In his preparation as an actor, he came across a little book about Jesus called *Man of Joy*, and that was how he decided to portray him.

So there are these scenes where Jesus is healing people, and he is beaming. Once after curing a man of leprosy, the man tackles him with a hug, and they're both laughing because of how great it is that the man is healed.

It's beautiful. It does something to your heart to see that side of Jesus. And this isn't just an actor making up a character. The Bible describes both God the Father and Jesus as having joy.

So what gives God joy? I'm sure there are many things, but four stand out in the Bible. One thing we know God enjoys is **working**. The creative process. Read just a little way into the first chapter of Genesis. God starts creating and what does he say? "And it was good."

In Proverbs 8, we get a taste of that creative process. Although it was written long before Jesus walked the earth, it seems to be written from his perspective:

Proverbs 8:23, 30-31

*I was appointed from eternity,
from the beginning, before the world began...
Then I was the craftsman at his side.
I was filled with delight day after day,
rejoicing always in his presence,
rejoicing in his whole world
and delighting in mankind.*

When I was little, I would go with my dad out to his shop. He had all these big, loud saws and drill presses and sanders that were totally intimidating. But he always seemed to know just which one he needed for whatever project he was making. It was impressive to watch him carve a table leg on the lathe or measure and cut shelving on the table saw, with just the right angles and depths.

Now I was no craftsman at his side, but get the picture of a father and son working together and having fun doing it. God takes delight in his projects. He creates because it gives him joy. He didn't make the world for any need other than that he wanted to.

It isn't just the work: God's joy also comes from that relationship with **his Son**. God couldn't contain that joy when Jesus came to earth – he wanted people to know how he felt. There was the big display of angels in the sky at his birth, and when Jesus reached his baptism, God himself spoke.

Matthew 3:16-17

The moment Jesus came up out of the baptismal waters, the skies opened up and he saw God's Spirit — it looked like a dove — descending and landing on him. And along with the Spirit, a voice: "This is my Son, chosen and marked by my love, delight of my life."

Proverbs tells us that a wise son brings joy to his father, and our Heavenly Father is no different. God is so pleased with Jesus, that when we have Christ in our lives, he's pleased with us as well.

God also enjoys **happy endings**. He loves it when something that is broken gets fixed, when something wrong gets put right and when something lost gets found. That's what the parable Jesus told was all about.

Luke 15:8-10

Or suppose a woman has ten silver coins and loses one. Does she not light a lamp, sweep the house and search carefully until she finds it? And when she finds it, she calls her friends and neighbors together and says, 'Rejoice with me; I have found my lost coin.' In the same way, I tell you, there is rejoicing in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents.

What a fantastic and wild thought: that repentance by a single person could cause so much joy throughout heaven. It tells you what the culture of that place is like. I've visited too many churches where the atmosphere was downright depressing and gloomy. But the church is not God. Sometimes we do a very poor job of reflecting him, and when we are one big scowl, that's some false advertising for the kingdom of God, because the mood in heaven is one of joy. And anytime we see examples of people making turnarounds and setting things right, we should turn them into an excuse to practice celebrating.

God loves working toward happy endings. Part of the reason for that is that he genuinely likes **his people**, too. Maybe one of the most amazing things is that we actually bring God joy. Let me read you a quick series of verses:

Zephaniah 3:17

*The LORD your God is with you,
he is mighty to save.
He will take great delight in you,
he will quiet you with his love,
he will rejoice over you with singing.*

Isaiah 62:5

*As a bridegroom rejoices over his bride,
so will your God rejoice over you.*

Psalms 37:23

*The steps of the godly are directed by the LORD.
He delights in every detail of their lives.*

And in case we think that he just finds joy in the group as a whole, look at Psalm 18:

Psalms 18:18-19

*They confronted me in the day of my disaster,
but the LORD was my support.
He brought me out into a spacious place;
he rescued me because he delighted in me.*

You may have heard parents say from time to time, “I love my kids, but I don’t necessarily LIKE them all the time.” Meaning – I love them, but I’m not enjoying them right now. I can sometimes project that idea onto God. I know he loves me, but I’m not so sure he likes me or enjoys me.

But the Bible says he DOES! God delights in you. He thinks you are wonderful. The thought of you brings joy to his heart. And I believe that is what makes joy possible for us. It is his joy that then spills over into our lives.

On May 7, 1824, An aging and ill Ludwig van Beethoven stood on the conductor’s stand in Vienna for the first time in 12 years. He was conducting his newly finished Ninth Symphony. Beethoven had struggled to write this symphony more than any other, laboring over it for 6 years. The fourth movement in particular was tough, because he was trying something nobody else had ever done. He was pulling in voices as if they were part of the orchestra, making the choir part of the symphony. Beethoven borrowed a poem he had loved for 30 years – Ode to Joy. It was a massive and risky project. And the orchestra felt under-rehearsed and unready for opening night.

But when Beethoven took to the stage that night, he came alive. People who watched him said he completely lost himself in the music, sweeping his arms in huge arcs, then making himself small and low, almost acting out the music. One of the musicians said it was as if Beethoven wanted to play every instrument and sing for the whole chorus, he was so immersed in his conducting. He actually kept conducting several measures after the orchestra stopped, since he was at this point in his life he was completely deaf. One of the singers had to turn him around to see the reaction of the crowd because he genuinely couldn’t hear it.

Beethoven’s joy had been contagious, and the whole crowd got caught up in it. They could feel the electricity of joy that the words and the music and the conductor so perfectly embodied. All through the symphony, the audience would burst into spontaneous applause and gave Beethoven five standing ovations. It was unheard of. The police literally had to step in to contain the situation because the crowd was so enthusiastic.

Some of the words the choir sang that night roughly translate like this: Let us sing more cheerful songs, more joyful. Joy! Joy! Joy, beautiful spark of God. We come fire-touched, heavenly one, to your shrine. Be embraced, you millions! This kiss for the whole world! Brothers, beyond the star-canopy there must be a loving Father. World, do you sense your Creator? Joy, beautiful spark of God.

That is one of those moments in history you wish you could have seen firsthand. It was as if everything and everyone there entered into joy at once, sharing a moment of sheer bliss.

Joy, beautiful spark of God. God is conducting the symphony of his creation and he is wrapped up in the joy of it. We can see him, and we catch that beautiful spark and our lives are transformed because of it.

So what is this spark that we're talking about? How do we define joy?

Even though we all say we want it, joy is a hard word to define. It's not quite happiness, but it looks like happiness. It's an emotional word, but there's more to it. Dictionaries try to use words like gladness and cheerfulness and mirth to get at it, but those words seem too shallow.

So I've made up my own definition, which you may never hear after this morning. But I think it captures at least some of the nuances of joy.

Joy: Intense appreciation of the present moment in light of the past and the future.

Let me give you a contrast between happiness and joy. I don't know if you saw the story in the news a couple weeks ago about the rescue off the Florida coast. Walter Marino's 12 year old son, Christopher, had been swimming in the ocean when he started to get too far out. Walter jumped in and swam to save him, but they ended up both getting caught in the currents and pulled out to sea. To pass the time, Walter would shout "To infinity!" and Christopher would yell back, "And beyond!" But as the night grew darker, Walter was shouting louder and louder, and Christopher's voice was sounding further and further away, until there was only silence. By the time the Coast Guard came, they had drifted a full mile apart.

The dad was found first – tired, but alive. Coast Guard officers asked him if he wanted to sit above or below as they kept searching for his son. He chose below, because he was sure his son was gone and he didn't want to see him lifeless in the water. But a little while later, he was asked to come up on deck. Walter said those three steps up were like his green mile, because he was sure he was being called up there to identify the body. Instead, he was directed to look up at a helicopter, where his son had been lifted to safety, alive and well.

Twelve year old Christopher was definitely happy to be rescued, but his feelings weren't quite the same as his dad's. Because Christopher has autism, and according to his Walter, he never knew he was in danger. It was all just one big adventure to him, just another day at the beach. His happiness never changed. But for Walter, it was different. Finding Christopher alive was pure joy. It was like getting his son back from the dead. Even as they took him to the hospital on a stretcher, Walter was pumping his fists in the air for joy. He said, "I never kissed so many Coast Guard men in my life."

Joy is an intense appreciation of the moment. You can be an optimist and be happy no matter what, but joy runs deeper, because it knows something about the past or the future that makes the present particularly meaningful. Joy makes you extra aware and grateful for the blessings at hand. Your senses are heightened to the preciousness of what you have.

This goes against what we would naturally think about the fruit of the Spirit. If something is spiritual, we tend to imagine that it would take our mind off the present and put it on heaven. We tend to think shouldn't care too much about what happens to us in this world. "It's all gonna burn anyway." We feel our mind should only be on eternal things.

But that's not the effect of joy at all – Joy is what really enables us to live in the moment as we're intended to, because it understands the moment in context. In fact, if you look at all the things Scripture references that we can enjoy, they're almost all very "in the moment", tangible thing. The present world is meant to be a source of joy for us.

So how do we cultivate that? I've got to admit – I'm terrible about living in the moment. I'm always planning ahead or reliving my mistakes. How can I become more joyful?

As we are seeing with the other fruit, the key is not to try harder. It would be kind of an oxymoron to try to knuckle down and crank out joy. It's the life of the Spirit that generates the fruit, and it is the joy of God that we talked about earlier that will infuse joy in our lives as well. Nehemiah told the Israelites this:

Nehemiah 8:10

the joy of the LORD is your strength.

Not joy FROM the Lord – it is the joy OF the Lord that gives us strength. What makes him joyful will make us joyful. Let's look at those four centers of joy again, now from our perspective instead of God's.

Working

What's that chorus? "I sing for joy at the work of your hands." God's not the only one who finds joy in a beautiful sunset or snow-capped mountain. Looking at the stunning beauty God has created is a tremendous source of joy.

But it isn't only God's work that does that for us. He's implanted in us the same capacity to find satisfaction in the things we do and make.

Isaiah 65:22

My chosen ones will long enjoy the works of their hands.

You have the creative energy to make something of the world God has created. You're wired for work of some kind. Your body and mind and personality gravitate toward

certain activities, things you're really good at, the projects you get into and totally lose track of time because you are so in the moment. And that's the way God made you. It's good to take joy in what you do. Granted, it's easy to be consumed by work – but that's no longer joy, because that's when the present is no longer considering the past and future with Christ.

What about when what we do isn't our favorite. We have a lot of work to complete in this world that just needs to get done. I go back to our definition. In order to find meaning in the tasks we don't like, joy looks backward and forward to create a frame of reference. You change a dirty diaper and can find some measure of joy not because it is fun – but because you're contributing to the long-term well being of your baby. You can push through the last few hours of your day at work, not because you're in love with your job but because you're able to feed your family, and there's joy in that.

Jesus did that with his own work.

Hebrews 12:2

Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before him endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.

Joy is not about ignoring pain or pretending we're happy about it when we're not. It's just wrapping it in a larger context.

A couple weeks ago, Karin went with Becky Mann up to her chemo treatment. The doctors and nurses were having difficulty getting a line into a blood vessel, which is a very painful process. Karin asked Becky how bad it was, and she said, "You know, I just kept thinking, this is nothing compared to what Jesus did for me."

That's joy – finding meaning in the work that has to be done, even when it's not what makes us happy.

As Becky discovered, part of that joy is not just in the work, but in our relationship with God's Son, Jesus.

Dr. William Lane Craig is a Christian professor of philosophy. At one point in his career, he and his wife were studying in Germany. While they were there, they met a Polish physicist, and they got into a conversation with her about God. She was an atheist. She told them her study of physics had destroyed any belief in God she might have had, and now life was just meaningless to her. She said, "When I look out at the universe, all I see is blackness. And when I look within myself, all I see is blackness." She felt completely empty.

It just so happened that Dr. Craig had just written his dissertation using physics as proof of God's existence, so he shared it with her. As she read it, she got more and more

excited. She got to the part that talked about astronomy and astrophysics and she said, “I know these scientists!” It turned her around and they were able to tell her about Christ. She went back to her room and invited Jesus into her life.

And Dr. Craig writes, “When we saw her the next day, her face was radiant with joy.” She had been using alcohol and pills to cope with her emptiness, and she flushed it all down the toilet. She was truly transformed. Her hollowness from before was such a contrast to the way she was filled up with joy. She was joy FULL.

There’s an old song that says, “Jesus, you’re the center of my joy,” and it’s true. We have an empty void without him that all the joy from other sources can never fill. Joy is found in that relationship with him, because he’s the one that supplies meaning to our future and who rescues us from our past.

That means we too can celebrate **happy endings**.

As I said before, God likes happy endings that are about people turning around, getting set straight, broken lives getting fixed. To get to those happy endings and find that joy means realigning ourselves with what God is doing. And that means obedience. Jesus told his disciples:

John 15:9-12

As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Now remain in my love. If you obey my commands, you will remain in my love, just as I have obeyed my Father's commands and remain in his love. I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete.

The reason for obedience to God is not to make us miserable and take away our fun. The goal is our complete joy.

Jim Cymbala tells a story of when he and his wife Carol were newlyweds and getting used to being married. One night Carol made a nice steak dinner. But Jim says, “The only trouble was, I like steak on the rare side and what she put in front of me tasted like well-done shoe leather. This disturbed me because Carol knew how I liked steak cooked.” So he made a comment, she responded, and before you knew it, they were fighting.

He said, “I was determined to have the last word...I declared that I was going to the midweek church service that night and added that not even a burnt-to-a-crisp piece of steak would keep me from my devotion to Christ! Not surprisingly, I went alone.

Well he got there and right away, he heard the Holy Spirit telling him, “Get up and go home. Tell her you were wrong and say you’re sorry!” That was almost too much for Jim. Apologize for burnt steak? But he kept hearing it. So he got up and drove home.

The whole way home, he argued with God. But as he started climbing the stairs to their apartment, his heart changed and softened. By the time he got to the door he was crying, telling Carol, "I'm sorry. I was wrong. Please forgive me."

He said, "As I spoke aloud my confession of failure and sin to my wife and to God, peace and joy welled up together as my tears became a language I knew God understood, because it was to him and not Carol alone that I was speaking."

Joy floods in when we confess our sins to God. David prayed and said, "Restore unto me the joy of my salvation." And that's what God does when we're willing to obey.

Some of us here right now are in an all out rebellion. We're going our own way and rejecting God. Others of us are conducting little mini-rebellions on the side. Trying to keep up the appearance of going along with God, while deep down we know there's this one area we're still hanging on to. And we're fighting him.

It's that pursuit of our own happiness rather than joy, and it's not going to produce the results we want. It's time to let it go. I am pleading with you today. Let it go. It's time to turn around and walk into the arms of a joyful God who loves restoring people. There are happy endings when we come back into line with what God is doing.

I love what Peter wrote:

1 Peter 1:8-9

Though you have not seen him, you love him; and even though you do not see him now, you believe in him and are filled with an inexpressible and glorious joy, for you are receiving the goal of your faith, the salvation of your souls.

We can receive the benefits of God's rescue today. Again, it's the way joy lives in light of the future and past to make the present better than ever.

Best of all, God put us in a community of **his people** to share joy with one another.

In the New Testament, Paul so often wrote to the churches about how much joy they gave to him. Tom Kind mentioned at the Men's breakfast how the Bible talks about our inheritance in the saints, meaning the incredible gift we have in the people of God. The apostle John also wrote what a joy it was to see how other believers were walking with the Lord.

We have the opportunity to be that source of joy for one another. It's so encouraging to hear what God is doing in somebody else's life.

Psalm 126:3

The LORD has done great things for us, and we are filled with joy.

Are you feeling joyful this morning?

I'd like to challenge you to try something different this morning. In your program, each of these four sources of joy is listed with some stars next to it, like you would rate a video or song on the Internet. I'd like you to rate your own joy level for each. Maybe you're really finding joy in your work, but your relationship with Christ is dry. Maybe work is too much of a source of satisfaction than it should be. Maybe your relationship with Jesus feels like a 1 out of 5 for you.

Once you've identified where you're at, look at what's the lowest, and ask yourself, "Am I ready to ask God for more joy in my life in this area? Do I need the joy of salvation restored to me? Is there something I need to confess? Am I ready to let go and align myself with him to cultivate more joy there? "

Jesus said he wanted our joy to be complete. Ask him to move you closer to finished today.