

How to find joy

This is our 2nd week now with a sermon on the theme of anxiety - or at least partially. Paul mentions anxiety in our present text, but is much more interested in its opposite counterpart: joy and gratitude. So together with last week, this is a duo series: "Don't Worry, Be Happy."

I wanted to preach on this theme for a couple of reasons:

1. It's a fairly universal experience for us and we seldom address it directly in the Church,
2. Also, I'm hoping in these 2 messages to lay some groundwork for a series we'll start next week reflecting on how the Gospel gives us hope in the face of a particular source of anxiety: Politics, in the midst of an election year. If you're anything like me, the state of politics in our world can be overwhelming, depressing, and anxiety producing, and our anxiousness can often lead us to either total disengagement or else fanatic obsession. In the midst of all that, we'll be reflecting on what it means to be a non-anxious presence, rooted in God's presence.
3. But finally, I've also wanted to preach on this theme of anxiety because it's a personal issue for me, and one in which I have found and am finding the Gospel to come to life in deeper and richer ways all the time. That Jesus truly is near to us in our deepest places of longing and distress.

Our hope in Jesus is real - not just an idea we give lip service to so that others can see us as shiny, happy people. His resurrection life makes a difference for us, and I want others to know.

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Our text this morning is really rather straightforward. Rejoice! Don't be anxious. Rejoice and give thanks. Meditate on the good things of God and find peace in His glory. That's really it.

But let's look at it a little deeper, shall we? I've got some questions for our reflection:

- What if I don't actually feel joy? How am I just supposed to make myself rejoice?
- And if I don't feel it, is there any way I can discover joy when I'm discouraged or anxious?
- Finally, let's say that I know all of this is what I OUGHT to do...what if I still struggle?

I. How can I rejoice if I don't feel joy? (4-7)

Just as with last week's passage from the Sermon on the Mount, I think there's much more going on here than just "stop being anxious, be happy instead." This isn't a condemnation of our emotional state when we feel anxious. It's encouragement and instruction for HOW we can discover hope and joy in Christ in the midst of our distress and worry.

Last week, we looked at Jesus' instruction in the Sermon on the Mount - Don't worry. But he says more than that. Jesus redirects our attention from anxiety over the possible loss of future whats to a simple trust in the present who of the Father.

Look at the birds, look at the lilies. The Father cares for them. Aren't you loved even more?

Jesus was very aware that he was speaking to crowds of people who knew what it was like to struggle, to hurt, and maybe even to have legitimately questioned where their next meal would come from. Paul also knows that the Philippians have suffered, and he has suffered as well.

He's even writing this letter to them from prison! Elsewhere in 2 Corinthians 1:8 he writes about a time he suffered so much he "despaired of life itself."

That's evidence enough to show us that Paul is not saying he expects us to FEEL happy all the time. And yet... he says that we should rejoice always. Paul is talking about living a life of such habitual gratitude and prayer that we become immersed in God's peace.

In a way, Paul is encouraging us to *practice* joy.

A couple of years ago now, I hit a really dark season in my life. After trying several options for counseling that didn't pan out for various reasons, I found myself, in a moment when I felt particularly desperate, reaching out to a helpline.

I wasn't in such a dark place that I was a danger to myself or anything, but my emotional distress was deep enough and persistent enough that it just scared me. I didn't know what to do. So I called, and I tried to explain my situation as best I could.

As this man patiently listened to me, he offered the advice that it sounded like I just needed more exercise in my life... Now, I'm going to be honest with you: That advice was not helpful to me. In fact, I felt completely insulted and dismissed. Here I am trying to reach out to someone, anyone, for help because I felt like I was spinning out of control, and their best solution was that I probably ought to get in some cardio.

And listen... they were not wrong. I did need more physical movement in my life, and things like our diet, sleep, and movement do play a significant factor in our mental and emotional health.

I just don't think I had adequately communicated how much distress I was really in. What I really needed to hear in that moment is what Paul says in the latter half of verse 5.

"The Lord is near." - He's coming to rescue soon. He's present in Spirit even now.

He is present with us in our pain. He is risen. And there is nothing that can separate us from the love of God. That's what I needed to know... that I was not alone.

I say all that to acknowledge that sometimes we physically cannot do all that we need to do for our mental health. Sometimes our circumstances make it difficult to exercise, eat healthy, get plenty of sleep, and all that.

But even then we can practice gratitude both physically and spiritually.

What does that look like? 3 suggestions (this is not an exhaustive list)

1. *Maybe it's a physical posture.* Paul says rejoice - we can do that with our bodies even when our spirits don't feel it. Raised hands, kneeling in prayer, seated palms up. These are all just postures, there's nothing particularly magical about them, but it's a way of communicating with your body the truth your spirit is trying to proclaim.

"Jesus is Lord." "Jesus can help." "Jesus is worthy, even in my pain"

2. *Maybe it's in the practice of community.* Paul says let your gentleness be evident to all. The Lord is near. Those aren't unrelated sentences. Because Jesus is close to us in the Spirit... Because Jesus is coming back to put all things to rights... Be noticeably gentle, so that others can come to know his love and care through us.

We could very well flip that idea to note that *we also need to know the gentleness and care of others.* Gathering for worship like this, or gathering in small groups, gives us regular touchpoints to share both joys and concerns. We can take them for granted, but they matter.

3. *It could even be a simple prayer.* Paul says to bring your prayers to God. Maybe even just a simple declaration and reminder - "The Lord is near." Over and over on repeat.

Whatever form it takes, when we practice this gratitude and prayer outwardly, we find, as Paul says, that "the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus."

That brings us to the second half of this passage, where Paul turns to the inward side of rejoicing.

II. How can I experience joy when I feel discouraged? (8)

"whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable—if anything is excellent or praiseworthy—think about such things."

Almost every teaching on worship postures that I've ever heard includes some reference to sports events and how *we ought to be* just as excited and emotionally expressive at church as we are at a football game.

The problem with the argument is that the fans at a football game are just that: fans. We aren't fans, we're players in the game. Church gatherings on Sunday morning aren't about coming together to watch and cheer for a show up here on stage. This is more like the locker room break where we get psyched up and prepare to go out for the next half.

Football players don't need to be told when and how to rejoice at a touchdown or when they win a game. It just happens. In fact, the bigger problem is keeping it from being too disruptive.

But when *do* athletes need encouragement? When things are going too well. A good coach will motivate the team and remind them of their practice, unlock their potential.

So Paul says - "Look! See the good and praiseworthy things that God is doing in your midst. Cherish and remember them. Call them to mind in times of struggle. Rejoice because God has been good and He will be good again and again!"

Meditate upon that which is good, true, noble, right, pure, lovely, admirable, and praiseworthy.

It's like that saying: You are what you eat. Our diets affect us. Our habits affect us. So too, our thought life affects us. What you dwell on will shape your life.

It doesn't mean pretending like the bad parts of life don't exist. But it does mean to be mindful of how our thoughts are shaping us. There is truth and beauty to be found in pain, but you have to look for it.

We've got to *practice* gratitude. Maybe keep a journal of what you're thankful for. Pray and reflect once a day on where you saw God moving. Cultivate gratitude.

Do it with others too. Go out of your way to notice and verbally thank others for what they're doing.

I had a friend once who was ordering food from McDonald's and asked to see the manager. They came out looking nervous and tentative, ready to handle a complaint, and my friend said, "I just wanted to say thank you to you and your staff for the great service. This cashier was exceptionally kind and I always love your food." The manager had no idea what to say, they were not prepared for that.

Practicing gratitude changes us. It makes us more joyful and it spreads that joy to others.

III. BUT WHAT IF I STILL STRUGGLE? (9)

Paul ends this section by telling the Philippians to follow his example and do as he does. I hope and I pray that my life is an example to others that I can feel confident in. *Sometimes, I'm not so sure.*

So I'll say with much fear and trepidation that I invite you to follow me as I follow Christ. And I hope that others can look to you the same way.

I'm convinced that being a Christlike example has nothing to do with being perfect. It means humbling ourselves like Jesus humbled himself. The One perfect person in this world, God in flesh, didn't worry what others thought but instead emptied himself completely that he might rescue us all.

Being like Jesus means that we can rest in the love he showed and extend it to others.

It means owning up to our mistakes and turning toward goodness in the hope and promise that God is not yet done.

When others see you confess and repent - that's when they know that this Gospel is real. They see a change.

When others see you rejoice *authentically*, even when they know full well the struggles of your life - that's when they know that your hope is real.

It starts with us.