

**There's an App for That:
Reflections on the Most Important Christian Qualities**

Joy

Nehemiah 8:8-12; John 15:9-11

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By Dr. David B. Freeman, Pastor
Weatherly Heights Baptist Church

Of all the criticisms made of Christians, surely one of the most damning was made by the German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche, who said that Christians have no joy.

No joy. Is that true? I hope not! I had lunch with one of our city leaders two weeks ago. He is on a board of directors for a certain organization in our city and wanted me to join their board. But, he admitted that the board had never had a clergyperson and was a bit apprehensive about asking a clergyman to join. So I asked why. He explained that they had fun at their board meetings and feared a clergyperson might ruin the fun!

I was shocked! I surely hope my profession and I are not that much of a wet blanket! I hated to learn that we have such a joyless reputation.

It is the second “fruit of the Spirit,” you know. Love is first and then joy. Paul wrote to the Galatians saying that those who belong to Christ should cultivate these nine important qualities: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. We’re spending the summer months focusing on these nine qualities, and it sounds like I especially need to focus on this second one.

So what’s the big deal about joy? And more importantly what is it? Guess what? There’s an app for that. It is John 15. Like the text from last week, this one too comes from the Thursday in the last week of Jesus’ life. The next day Jesus would be crucified. In an upper room with his disciples, Jesus gave them some of his most important teachings. In this text, he reflects back on what he just taught them and says, “I have said *these things* to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete.”

“...that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete.” That is what Jesus wanted for his disciples. I think it is still what God wants, so what is it exactly? Often we use the words “joy” and “happiness” interchangeably. The Bible does not. When the Bible speaks of joy, it does not mean the same thing as happiness.

I remember when my oldest daughter was in her first children's choir in our little country church down in Etowah County, they sang a song titled, "Apple Red Happiness." It was not only a favorite of the children; the adults loved it too. It went something like this, "I have apple red happiness, popcorn cheerfulness, cinnamon singing inside." I can still see and hear those adorable children singing it. And that was true for most of those children. They were apple red happy, popcorn cheerful, and cinnamon singing inside...some of the time.

Now as sweet as that little song is, it describes happiness, not biblical joy. Here's the difference. Happiness is fleeting, depending upon circumstances. Joy is not. Happiness exists as long as the circumstances are favorable, as long as the circumstances are happy. The joy Jesus described that Thursday night, on the other hand, when circumstances were not happy, is not dependent upon happy surroundings. Joy is more like the deep roots of a tree. They provide nourishment even during a drought. Joy is an anchor that holds steadfastly in calm and storm. For that reason James could say, "My brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of any kind, consider it nothing but joy." He didn't say to be happy about it.

Barbara Brown Taylor is one of my favorite writers. This is what she says about it. She begins with a question:

Who can be joyful while babies starve and teenagers shoot each other and whole tribes of people try to wipe each other off the face of the earth? It's hard to get jump-up-and-down joyful about any of that. Only joy has never had very much to do with what is going on in the world at the time.... The only condition for joy is the presence of God. Joy happens when God is present and people know it, which means that it can erupt in a depressed economy, in the middle of a war, in an intensive care waiting room. (Living Pulpit, October-December, 1996, p 16)

Happiness is not likely to erupt in those places, but this anchor and those deep roots certainly might. And here's why. The Greek word for joy is *chara*. It is closely related to the word *charis*, the New Testament word for "grace." In the Bible, joy is not something you find by going after it, pursuing it, making it your life goal to find it. You find joy by having grace in your life. Joy is the natural result of a life filled with grace, the grace God gives us and the grace we give ourselves. You find happiness by going to places that make you happy and doing things that make you happy. But you find joy by accepting that in the resurrection of Christ God has taken us into his arms, forgiven us, and claimed us as his own. And that is a joy that the world and the circumstances of the world cannot take away from you.

Do you remember the circumstances in the book of Nehemiah? It was an awful time for the people of Israel. For you who have gone through the book of Jeremiah on Wednesday nights, this occurred after the fall of Jerusalem and a lengthy period of exile in the land of Babylon. For forty years, Jeremiah had predicted that God's judgment would come to the people of Judah. A "foe from the north" would invade, he warned, destroy the city, and take the people into exile. The people ignored Jeremiah, made fun of him, beat him, threw him into a pit, and even tried to kill. Finally the judgment came, and it was devastating, as awful as awful could be. The city of Jerusalem and the temple were destroyed, and the people were taken away as prisoners of war.

The books of Ezra and Nehemiah were written after that. Some of the people were permitted to return to Jerusalem. They saw the ruins. The homes where they once lived, ransacked. The gardens that once supplied food, in rubble. And the temple. Not only was it in ruins, it had been desecrated. In the midst of those awful circumstances, Nehemiah called upon Ezra, the priest, to read from the Law of Moses, the Law that had been their foundation as a people. When the people heard the reading of the Law of Moses, they began to "mourn and weep."

This was not a happy day for the people. They remembered their family and friends who were no longer with them. They saw the great devastation of their homeland. They heard the reading of the Law and then mourned and wept. Listen now to what Nehemiah said to them,

Go your way, eat the fat and drink sweet wine and send portions of them to those for whom nothing is prepared, for this

day is holy to our Lord; and do not be grieved, for the joy of the Lord is your strength.

During a time of darkness, destruction, depression, and despair, the joy of the Lord was their strength. That is biblical joy.

Love first. And then the second fruit of the Spirit is joy, this biblical joy that anchors our lives, that reaches deeply, so that we have nourishment when we need it most.

- When the disciples learned on Thursday night that Jesus would be crucified the next day, there was nothing in that news to be happy about. For three years, they had believed in him, abandoned everything else. And then they learned that he would die. Then the joy of the Lord was their strength.
- When we accept that we're not going to get better, there's nothing in that news to be happy about. You've tried all your options, done everything you knew to do, but the inevitable continues to march. Then the joy of the Lord is our strength.
- Your spouse says that it is over. She wants a divorce. It's not what you want. There's nothing in that news to be happy about. Then the joy of the Lord is our strength.

We find that joy by accepting that God through Christ has taken us into his arms, forgiven us, and claimed us as his own. It is a joy that the world and the circumstances of the world cannot take away. So again Jesus waited until the night before his crucifixion. With the light of history shining upon him, he reflected upon what he had just told his disciples and said, "I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete." This summer let's cultivate joy within this family of faith.

Closing Prayer

Lord, you taught us how to follow your way. Now help us to do so. Amen.