

“Empowered: Joy Full”

May 30, 2021

Empowered: Fruit of the Spirit series

It's easy to say that people who believe in God should be joy full. We've heard it before - that if you love Jesus, you should be joyful. But it's not so simple when we consider what joy is and isn't. Joy isn't the same as happiness, and many times in Scripture, we're told that joy and sorrow can go together. They're not opposites.

As we planned for this series, one of our Worship Team members wrote this: “The concept of having Joy with the presence of adversity or sadness is challenging to me. I looked for a definition, and the best I found was that Joy is internal and comes when you make peace with who you are, why you are, how you are, and that it is a mark of a faithful heart. Happiness was defined as externally triggered by other people, things, places, thoughts, and events. I think sometimes it's difficult to feel the internal peace of Joy when there is a lack of grace or acceptance in relationships with other people and situations that we value.” And then came the big question: *How do we keep Joy in our heart when the going is tough?*

I wish I had an easy answer! First, it's clear that joy isn't the same as happiness. And if we're looking at how the Holy Spirit cultivates joy in our lives, I immediately think of many people who have been examples of joy for me - some of them family members, many of them faithful people who endured incredible tragedies and struggles, but continued to exude joy - not fake happiness or pretending everything is ok - but a deep-down sense of God's presence and strength. And the person who offered that reflection - even sharing the struggle of how joy and sadness can go together - is someone who reflects joy for me.

In the church, we talk about joy a lot - especially on high holidays like Christmas (*Joy to the world, the Lord is come...*). Joy when we celebrate the Incarnation and on Easter (*Christ the Lord is risen today...raise your joys and triumphs high*). Joy when we celebrate resurrection. Joy is a response to our relationship with Jesus: God with us, God who died for us and who offers new life and hope to us, and God who stays with us in the Holy Spirit.

In the passage from the Gospel of John, Jesus promises his full joy for us even as he faces persecution and death. This passage is in Jesus' final speech in John's Gospel. He talks about joy - that our joy may be complete in him even as he faces death. How do we claim joy in Jesus?

Paul writes to a community where there is conflict about grace and law, and he wants them to focus on what it means for them to have freedom in Christ - not personal liberty - but freedom to love and serve God. Paul acknowledges all of the selfish desires that we fight against and then offers this list of qualities that God cultivates in those who live by the Spirit. It's worth keeping Galatians chapter 5 in front of us. Why is joy a

part of it?

Paul reminds these new Christians in Galatia that we can't earn God's love. Jesus has shown God's grace by dying on the cross, and our faith in Christ working through acts of love is how we respond to God's love. We cannot earn it. We can only receive it and share it through the power of the Holy Spirit.

And the power of the Spirit produces fruit in us that builds a strong community. Love was first - agape love is that gives - receiving nothing and expecting nothing in return. Agape love doesn't look for a reward - that love that grows in us as we consider Jesus' love for us. So, from love we go to joy...and the order is important.

Again, joy is not happiness. C.S. Lewis said that "*Joy is the serious business of Heaven.*" It is deeper than happiness. It is more profound and more difficult to describe, and yet, we know it when we see it. If I asked you to describe a joyful person, you probably could. We know when we're around someone who is full of joy - not just a happy person, but someone who points to God and gives God glory because of the gift of salvation. Joy is a deep and lasting quality that it radiates out from people.

Chara is the Greek word used in Galatians 5. **SHOW SLIDE:** Greek word for JOY – JOY - **χαρά** It's translated as joy, gladness, delight. In fact, the word *chara* comes from *charis* - the Greek word for grace. That connection is vital to our understanding of joy - and how it's distinct and different from happiness.

Joy is a product of grace. Joy comes from receiving grace. Joy really is a gift that we cannot earn or deserve. It is not a goal we pursue, but a gift that we receive from God and a quality that God nurtures in us. One person says that joy is "grace recognized." Joy is grace realized - unexpected and unearned. We should note that as we make our way through the fruit of the Spirit, joy comes between love and peace.

And it's key to consider the opposite of joy. It is not sadness or sorrow. We might say it's unbelief, which can produce worry and anxiety. I want to be clear that when I say anxiety, I'm not talking about a clinical term. I'm talking about a spiritual term. Maybe we can think of a time when we felt a lack of joy - when worry and anxiety can creep in. John 15 helps us grasp it. Jesus says that we rest in God's love "so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete." Without joy - that deep down assurance of God's presence, faithfulness, and love - we live with constant worry.

Joy focuses on an eternal perspective. We cannot have true joy without the acceptance of God's grace. We cannot experience true joy without receiving God's grace in Jesus Christ. In the reflection I read earlier, there was something about making peace with who you are in God. Each of us is beloved. Each of us adored by God who created us. I hope this short video helps us to claim the joy of that truth. **SHOW**

MEDIA: "Find Your True Identity"

Joy isn't based on our present circumstances. Joy isn't based on financial

success, good health, or popularity. Happiness might be, but joy is more deeply rooted and more tried and tested. Joy has more to do with perseverance and trust when things aren't going quite right. We cannot find true joy in stuff or circumstances or experiences - no matter how hard we try. It's not that God doesn't want us to be happy. God created us and desires the best for us. But God knows that we can't really find joy - that deep-down assurance - anywhere except in our relationship with God our Creator.

Some would say they feel joy if everything's going our way, if there's no conflict in our relationships, if we're not worried about anything. But joy doesn't wait for the struggle to be over or for things to be perfect. Joy is a constant because the Source of our joy is constant. God's love does not fail, and that's the source of our joy. Joy depends on our relationship with our steadfast God, rooted and grounded in our faith in Jesus, and sustained by the Holy Spirit.

Being joyful doesn't mean that we don't pay attention to what's going on in our lives or in the world. We don't ignore pain or grief. We don't ignore natural disasters or the reality of violence or the divisiveness in this moment. We don't offer empty words when people are struggling or grieving - telling them it'll be ok.

Joy isn't the toxic positivity - "good vibes only" mindset. Joy doesn't mean that we overlook the pain and tragedy around us. In fact, joy really comes out of sorrow. If you've never seen the Pixar movie *Inside Out*, I'd recommend it. It shows how joy and sadness can live together - and do live together - in us. Joy comes when we have a sense of God's presence and power, when we can face struggle and uncertainty knowing that God is beside us, when we allow ourselves to reach out to others and recognize our connection to God and one another.

Think of those folks who have been faithful witnesses for you. We know people who endure difficult days, months, and years. And yet, they praise and thank God each day. Joy calls us to respond as people who have experienced God's grace and want to share that joy with others. Ultimately, we cultivate the important discipline of giving thanks and responding with thanksgiving. It reminds me of lyrics from a song:

SHOW SLIDE: Lyrics from How Can I Keep from Singing? (FWS 2212)

*No storm can shake my inmost calm,
While to that rock I'm clinging.
Since love is lord of heaven and earth
How can I keep from singing?*

I think of the birds that I hear - singing without abandon. It seems like I hear them more often - or maybe I'm just more attentive to them.

Joy comes from the assurance of salvation in Jesus Christ. We should be full of joy at our relationship with God - not as a source of pride for ourselves, but rather as a witness to offer to the world. We do not save ourselves - God saves us by the grace of

Jesus Christ through the faith that we claim and live - seeking God's will, seeking to forgiving others, being in community with others, serving for Jesus' sake, and sharing Good News. Remember that the angels shared "Good News of great joy" when Jesus was born!

We should be full of joy because we belong to God. Does that mean we don't struggle with temptation and sin? No! But it does mean that we know our need for God and the freedom that we have in Christ to love God and serve God. If we belong to God, then we are called to be holy - seeking to grow in faith and love.

Joy calls us to respond with thanksgiving and praise. Sometimes we do not witness to the joy of life in Jesus Christ. We only talk about the difficulty instead of expressing the joy, too. We begin our prayers with "Please, God ... " and continue with our list instead of beginning with " Thankyou, God... " and offering our list of praises.

Certainly, Jesus was clear of the cost of discipleship. Following Jesus is not easy. Following Jesus is not risk-free. Following Jesus doesn't mean that everything is predictable or that we can do whatever we want or that we're happy all the time. But what about the joy of following Jesus? Can we witness to the joy of loving him and serving him? Can we witness to the difference that it makes?

Billy Sunday is credited with saying, "If you have no joy, there's a leak in your Christianity somewhere." That's a challenging statement, and yet, if we consider the meaning of joy - that it's a fruit of the Spirit - then it's true. We don't have to be happy, but if we claim to know Jesus, then the Spirit cultivates joy in us because joy is always tied to God's love and faithfulness - to God's grace. Think about Joseph (Old Testament) who was able to trust God in incredibly difficult circumstances. After David was caught in adultery, he said, "Restore to me the joy of your salvation..." The Psalms are filled with words of joy and thanksgiving because of God's faithfulness. Mary sang of the joy of knowing that Jesus came to save.

Jesus wanted his disciples to know joy. It was his desire and prayer. We hear it clearly in John 15. Again, this is Jesus' final teaching before he goes to the cross. Even at this point, he's praying that his followers would know the joy that he offers. And joy is not just momentary when Jesus talks about it. Joy abides. When we experience salvation, joy remains.

Living in grace brings joy to God. This is what we seek to do as we live by the Spirit. We find joy in studying God's Word and growing in our faith - sometimes even with more questions than answers - but with a deeper trust in God's leading. Our joy shows when we worship and express praise to God. Joy shows when we talk about our faith with others - when we praise God and give God glory. Joy shows when we serve others in the name of Jesus. And when we're serving with the gifts God has given us, then we discover joy in ministry.

If we struggle to feel joy full, perhaps one place to start is to consider God's

blessings. Gratitude is a great opener to joy. Generosity is a great channel for joy. Giving and serving remind us of our connections to others - and our connection to God - which nurture joy in us. So how do we find joy when times are tough? Maybe that's a start.

May God help us be more joy-full.

Thanks be to God. AMEN.