

MAINTAINING YOUR JOY

“The same love that set the captive free, the same love that opened eyes to see...”

You were once blind, but your eyes have been opened. You were once captive, but you are now free. Why is it then that so many Christians lose their joy? When they first give their life to Christ they live in that freedom and they view the world through fresh eyes. Full of enthusiasm for their new-found faith, full of love for their Saviour and for others it seems like everything is possible. But as time goes on it's as though they've sprung a leak. Slowly the joy that was once so plentiful seems to have drained away. Have you sprung a leak? Do you feel like the joy is draining out of you, or perhaps that there isn't even a drop left?

I've heard people say that this is just the way it is. I don't accept that, and it doesn't have to be this way! Christians should be the most joyful people in the entire world. Turn with me to Phil. 3:1 -11 and we'll discover together how we can maintain our joy, or – in some instances – recapture it when it seems lost.

Further, my brothers and sisters, rejoice in the Lord! It is no trouble for me to write the same things to you again, and it is a safeguard for you. ² Watch out for those dogs, those evildoers, those mutilators of the flesh. ³ For it is we who are the circumcision, we who serve God by his Spirit, who boast in Christ Jesus, and who put no confidence in the flesh— ⁴ though I myself have reasons for such confidence.

If someone else thinks they have reasons to put confidence in the flesh, I have more: ⁵ circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; in regard to the law, a Pharisee; ⁶ as for zeal, persecuting the church; as for righteousness based on the law, faultless.

⁷ But whatever were gains to me I now consider loss for the sake of Christ. ⁸ What is more, I consider everything a loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things. I consider them garbage, that I may gain Christ ⁹ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ—the righteousness that comes from God on the basis of faith. ¹⁰ I want to know Christ—yes, to know the power of his resurrection and participation in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, ¹¹ and so, somehow, attaining to the resurrection from the dead.

The first thing Paul says, is **“Finally my brothers, rejoice in the LORD!”** Paul wants the Philippians to be a joyful people; he knows that this should be their hallmark!

He then says, **“It is no trouble for me to write the same things to you again, and it is a safeguard for you.”** Paul recognizes that there are killjoys in life, people and things that will rob you of joy. He then takes the Philippians back to some basic teaching, recognizing the importance of revisiting and reminding them of certain principles for their well-being and so that they will not lose their joy.

1. RESIST LEGALISM

Legalism by definition is *strict, literal or excessive conformity to the law, or to a religious or moral code*. Legalism is probably the greatest killjoy in the life of a Christian. It can destroy individuals, families and churches. It usually begins very subtly and often with the best of intentions. Left unchecked, it takes our focus from what God has done for us to what we feel we have to do for God.

“Beware of those dogs, those evildoers, those mutilators of the flesh.” Paul is warning the church about Judaizers. Judaizers were a group of people who were fine with faith in Jesus, but they added to it. Their expectation was that you would also keep all of the Jewish laws as well. This is a warning against legalism.

You can tell from his language how strongly he feels. He calls them dogs. Dogs in his day were not cute pets, but scavengers that attacked humans. He calls them evildoers. He calls them mutilators of the flesh, in reference to circumcision. He feels so strongly because he understands that legalism robs people of their joy.

So what are some of the legalistic traps we must avoid today?

a. RITUALS

Some of you have come out of other Christian denominations or other faiths that contain a great deal of ritual. You might think, “We don’t have any rituals in the church.” Baptism. Communion. Baby Dedication. These can all become rituals. They are not bad in and of themselves. In fact they are an important part of celebrating the relationship we have with Christ. But, if we begin to trust in them for salvation, we are in trouble.

b. RELIGION

Did you ever notice that the one group of people that Jesus had little tolerance for were religious people? Most people refer to Christianity as a religion and I guess it is in the strictest sense of the word. But Jesus didn’t come to start a new religion. Jesus came to liberate us from religion. Religion is man’s attempt to gain access to God, through his own efforts. It is based on works. Jesus is God’s attempt to get to man. It is all about relationship. It is based on what God has done, not what we have done. It is only through a relationship with Jesus that we are saved and have a relationship with the Father.

c. RULES

Closely woven in with rituals and religion are rules. One of the groups Jesus had the most difficulty with was the Pharisees. The biggest problem with the Pharisees is that they approached God from the wrong perspective. The Pharisees took the Ten Commandments and expanded them out into 619 other commandments or rules. They sought to gain favour with God through keeping these rules. Their righteousness and relationship with God was based on their ability to keep the law.

Some Christians are like this as well. They have certain rules, boxes that must be ticked by which they judge themselves and others. If you tick enough of the boxes, you're a good Christian. The problem with living this way is that it is contrary to what Christ desires from us. A relationship with God is not about rule keeping; it's about relationship. Does this mean we don't pay attention to the ethics and morals of the Kingdom – of course not! But we embrace and live them out because of a sincere love for Jesus and his Kingdom, not as a means of gaining favour with God.

On December 18, 1865, the 13th Amendment to the Constitution of the United States was adopted, abolishing slavery. Yet, many slaves continued to live on as slaves. Shelby Foote, in his three-volume work on the Civil War, documents an unexpected reaction: *“Most slaves could repeat, with equal validity, what an Alabama slave had said in 1864 when asked what he thought of the Great Emancipator whose proclamation went into effect that year. ‘I don't know anything about Abraham Lincoln, except that he sought to free us. And I don't know anything about that neither.’”* Precious blood was shed on the battlefield to set those slaves free, yet many continued to live on as slaves out of fear, fear of the unknown, fear that their newly found freedom would be dangerous. How sad and disturbing this is.

Even more sad and disturbing is the reality that the precious blood of Jesus was shed on Calvary to set us free spiritually, and yet many still remain enslaved. They remain enslaved to legalism; to the idea that following certain rules and regulations earns them favour. In verse 3, Paul says, **“For it is we who are the circumcision, we who serve God by his Spirit, who boast in Christ Jesus, and who put no confidence in the flesh.”** In legalism, you are putting confidence in the flesh, in your own abilities. Resist legalism if you want to maintain joy in your life.

2. REFUTE REPUTATION

Last night, I watched the National Dog Show. I love dogs and try to watch this when it is televised. The different breeds are categorized into various groupings and then are judged against other dogs in that particular grouping. One dog is ultimately awarded Best in Show.

The “handlers” as they are called, walk or run their dog around the ring. The dogs are then observed by the judges in a sitting and standing position so they can inspect their bite, ears, tail and body structure among other things. I love listening to the commentators as they speak in hushed tones. “It’s obvious that the judge appreciates the particular point of Miss Priscilla of Pembroke’s tail. Yes Jerry, and notice how the light in the arena bounces off here glistening coat.”

My dog could never compete in one of these competitions. Now, I think he’s pretty cute, but he wouldn’t cut it. Why? Figaro is not a purebred. You see, only purebreds with the proper papers can compete. Have you ever felt like that in church?

If you want to maintain joy, you need to refute reputation.

Listen to what Paul says, **“If someone else thinks they have reasons to put confidence in the flesh, I have more: ⁵ circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; in regard to the law, a Pharisee; ⁶ as for zeal, persecuting the church; as for righteousness based on the law, faultless.”**

Do we not do that sometimes? We speak of our “pedigree” as though it gives us a certain standing. We speak proudly of the denomination we are a part of, as though a certain denomination has a lock on all things spiritual. We speak of our accomplishments saying, “I read the Bible cover to cover every year, I’ve held this or that position in the church, I can’t remember the last time I missed a Sunday at church. Other times, it’s our family heritage that we display. Have you ever heard someone say, “Well, my Mom’s a Christian...my aunt and uncle are missionaries...my Dad’s a pastor...our family has been a part of this church for forty years”.

None of these things is inherently bad. But the only person impressed with our reputation, our “credentials” is the person we see when we look in the mirror. If you believe that any of these things somehow gets you a bit higher up on the ladder with God, they don’t. Listen to what Romans 12:3 says in the Message.

“Living then, as every one of you does, in pure grace, it’s important that you not misinterpret yourselves as people who are bringing this goodness to God. No, God brings it all to you. The only accurate way to understand ourselves is by what God is and by what he does for us, not by what we are and what we do for him.” Romans 12:3 (The Message)

In the kingdom of God, your pedigree is not important – mutts are welcome! In fact, lest you think Paul was boasting, after listing all the reasons Paul should think more highly of himself than others he says this, **“But whatever were gains to me I now consider loss for the sake of Christ.”**

In a dog show, pedigree is of the utmost importance. In the Kingdom of Christ, reputation, credentials, pedigree – whatever you want to call it – does not matter. So refute reputation, don't worry about trying to get a leg up on anyone else; it will steal your joy. The ground is level at the foot of the cross.

REFOCUS PRIORITIES

The third thing we observe, is that Paul refocuses his priorities. **“But whatever were gains to me I now consider loss for the sake of Christ. What is more, I consider everything a loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things. I consider them garbage, that I may gain Christ⁹ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ—the righteousness that comes from God on the basis of faith.”**

Three times Paul uses the word loss, **“whatever were gains to me I now consider loss, I consider everything a loss, for whose sake (Jesus) I have lost all things.”** He says he considers everything “garbage”. The actual Greek word means, “dung”. The Message captures the sentiment of this passage perfectly.

“The very credentials these people are waving around as something special, I'm tearing up and throwing out with the trash – along with everything else I used to take credit for. Everything I once thought I had going for me is insignificant – dog dung. I've dumped it all in the trash so that I could embrace Christ and be embraced by Him.”

Paul refocused his priorities, and if you want to maintain your joy, you must do the same. Not just those that you consider spiritual, but all of your priorities in life. Our lives are not broken down into boxes. Our faith should permeate every aspect of our lives.

We live in a world that says, “You can have it all!” The truth is, you can't have it all, but many people – including Christians – spend a great deal of time pursuing joy where it can't be found. I have sat with a number of Christians who appeared to have it all. They'd spent a great deal of time building careers, were earning big salaries, had the big home, the cottage, everything we often think will bring us joy. But each of these people felt empty. Each of them expressed to me that the thing they wanted and lacked was true joy. Why didn't they have it? Their priorities were messed up. They were looking for joy in the wrong things. Now this doesn't mean that you can't have a cottage, a nice home, or any of these things and still have joy, but you must have the proper priorities.

What do you invest most of your time in? What do you make a priority in your life? When Paul refocused his priorities, he gave up his position, his power, his

pedigree. If you want to maintain your joy, you might have to refocus your priorities as well and it will cost you something. Paul counted everything as “dung” compared to knowing Jesus, what about you?

KNOWING JESUS

To maintain our joy we must resist legalism, refute reputation and refocus priorities. But maintaining our joy assumes that we have attained it. Remember, it is not something we attain through our own efforts. True joy, lasting joy, comes from knowing Jesus and this is the conclusion Paul leads us to in this passage of Scripture.

“What is more, I consider everything a loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things. I consider them garbage, that I may gain Christ⁹ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ—the righteousness that comes from God on the basis of faith. I want to know Christ—yes, to know the power of his resurrection and participation in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death,¹¹ and so, somehow, attaining to the resurrection from the dead.”

I want to know Christ. Say that with me, “I want to know Christ.” Say it again, “I want to know Christ.” Do you, do you really? The word used for know, *ginosko*, does not simply mean simply knowledge of Christ, or an acquaintance with him. The word Paul uses expresses that he wanted to know Christ intimately. The Amplified version says, **My determined purpose is that I may know Christ – that I may progressively become more deeply and intimately acquainted with Him, perceiving and recognizing and understand Him more strongly and clearly.”**

True, lasting joy comes from a growing and deeply intimate relationship with Jesus. So I ask you again, do you really want to know Jesus? Is this the type of relationship you long for?

Some people don’t want to come to Christ, to have a deep intimate relationship with Jesus because they are afraid they will have to change. They will have to give up some things they are doing. This is correct; because when you come to Jesus you have to give up everything that you’ve got. Otherwise, you are not truly a Christ follower.

I believe one of the greatest challenges facing the church today is not relevance or worldliness. It’s not the popularity of other religions. I believe one of our greatest challenges is that Jesus is merely an acquaintance to many Christians. They don’t make the effort, nor do they really care to have a deeply intimate relationship with him. Why – because it is too costly and they simply aren’t

willing make the sacrifice. Isn't it any wonder that joy seems to leak out as time passes? It doesn't need to be that way.

Today is the beginning of the Advent season. It's a season of expectation, a season of wonder and a season of reflection, a time to ponder. Joy entered the world. Entered our world as a tiny baby, *born to set his people free*. Do you know joy? It can't be achieved through rule keeping. It's not found in position or pedigree or possessions. It isn't brought about through human effort. No, joy can only truly be discovered through that tiny baby, *born a child and yet a king*.

Jesus is joy. Joy that lets you dance with abandon in the rain, that lets you laugh until your sides hurt, that lets your heart sing even in the darkest circumstance. Joy that will never leave you, *joy of every longing heart*.

I leave you with one final thought. It's an anonymous quote, but one that speaks volumes. "***When was the last time you laughed for the sheer joy of your salvation? People are not attracted to somber doctrines. There is no persuasive power in a gloomy and morbid religion. Let the world see your joy and you won't be able to keep them away. To be filled with God is to be filled with joy.***" Anonymous