

Tending the Garden of God – Joy and Its Enemies

1. As we saw last week and again in the reading by Levi and Erin, the fruit of the Spirit includes ‘joy.’ It is mentioned just after love, which I find interesting though it doesn’t look like Paul is trying to rank these gifts. We didn’t spend time on it last week, but if you look at the fruits of the flesh, there are several that are enemies of love. Most of them are also enemies of joy.
2. When a person grows and learns their place in the community, they have to know who they are but it is equally important to know who or what they are not. The same with the fruits of the Spirit; to know what joy is, we have to know what it is not and, then, we need to start building our defenses against the enemies of joy.
3. There are artists who specialize in surprising us. They start a painting and we all sit and watch, trying to figure out what it is going to be. Finally, after slashing lines and crafting curves and, sometimes, turning the whole canvas upside down, we see the picture clearly. The artist did not draw what was, but what was not, what was around the thing or person they wanted us to see.
4. We have to do that with joy. Let’s start by painting around it, painting what it is not. It is not happiness. Happiness is based on what is happening. It can be the result of happenstance or a happening that results from careful planning, but the principle is the same: we feel good because of what is occurring. Joy is different. Joy is deeper.
5. Joy is truly believing what we say we believe. Joy is trust in the character of God and in the ultimate realities that underlie the universe. If you believe that God is good, that God loves you, that Jesus walks with you and the Spirit is there to help you walk and help you pray...then what happens around you will not drive your joy underground.
6. Happiness can be exhausting because it requires us to rearrange the world around us. You might be sitting there thinking that you need a movie in front of you and some cake on a plate on your lap in order to be happy. And then, after clicking on a movie that Netflix or Amazon Prime says you will like, you may find that you do not and, so, you

scroll and hunt for another hour, trying to find something that makes you happy. Joy is different. Joy is constant, even when life drives it underground.

7. There is a crude phrase in our culture (and it has been there for decades) that translates to “bad stuff happens.” Crude or not, it’s true. Bad things happen to good people, bad people...all people. And bad things are not doled out by the universe in equal portions. Some people just get hit time and time and time again. We can’t honestly ask them to perk up, buck up, think on the sunny side, count their blessings....
8. God gives us time to mourn and Jesus was prophesied to be “a man of sorrows and well acquainted with our grief.” There is no reason for rush a person past their pain or shame them for their sadness. We can be in pain, grief, and shaken to our core and still have joy...still have our core beliefs. They may not make us FEEL better at the moment, but they are there, holding us upright.
9. We CAN train ourselves to be more aware of our joy. Do this simple experiment this week: choose a color, any color. If works equally well if you really like that color or if you really dislike it...choose that color and think about it a bit. Set aside 1 minute a couple of times a day to think about that color. You will quickly notice something: you start seeing that color a LOT more.
10. We can do the same with sounds, animals, clouds...you name it. We are wired to see more of the thing we are thinking about regularly. I see a beautiful river and my father in law sees a great fishing spot. Why? Because we are thinking about different things.
11. Joy and our experience of joy is absolutely affected by what we focus on. Even people of deep faith who can say the creeds with confidence can be sad, bitter people who sow nothing but pain and division around them. How is this possible? They are focusing on those things that are active enemies of joy. Here come the weeds to encroach upon your garden. **Galatians 5:19-21.**
12. The Bible was divided into verses by several men over the centuries but the one that stuck was William Whittingham’s work in the 1500s

that was published in the Geneva Bible. I can't wait to get to heaven to ask him what he was thinking. These weeds in Galatians 5 can be grouped – and perhaps should have been grouped – into their own discrete passages. The enemies of joy (and many other fruits of the Spirit) start in mid-verse 20 and end just after verse 21 begins. Hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions and envy.

13. Brothers and sisters: behold the weeds that are trying to get into your garden. They are crafty and will never stop trying to find a way to become a part of your life. Just like weeds scatter seeds through the wind, bird droppings, burrs on the coats of passing animals, or even by running shoots underground so they can pop up anywhere, these weeds are crafty, insistent, and don't give up.
14. **Psalm 139:23-24**. Careful gardeners watch and search daily. It doesn't take long for a garden to go back to the wild. We need to do a serious, honest assessment of our hearts. And we need to be very, very aware of one of the devil's favorite tools: masking these weeds as if they were flowers in God's gardens.
15. Christians since the first days of the church have blunted their witness and let their light go dark, all the while claiming they were only speaking honestly, with righteous anger, righteous indignation. They split families, churches, and friend groups. From there, it went all the way to the Inquisition where people were tortured and all they had was taken from them in the name of God...and without His authority.
16. A careful reading of Romans 14 and 15 makes it exceptionally plain that we are not allowed to play with these weeds. **Revelation 12:10-12**. Think about that: the team that slanders people is Team Satan. Now – brace yourselves. **2 Corinthians 11:13-15**.
17. The hunt for errors. The hunt for drama. The hunt for meaning through being offended. The vague and formless accusations (“well, we've been seeing several things”). These are all weeds that love to disguise themselves as the flowers of God, the fruits of the Spirit...but they are still weeds.

18. Take some time this week to begin your search for weeds – especially those you've always assumed were flowers (I thought division was a duty...and found out it was a sin).

19. Ask yourself what you are looking for...and maybe that is why you are seeing it so often. That can be a negative or a positive. That is entirely up to you. Joy does not come from the actions of others around you. Joy comes from our hearts when we believe in God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit...and we believe that They love us and that justice tempered with mercy will be done...for God is good.

20. And every so often, if you are filled with joy, tell your face.