

A Sermon For Every Sunday

Philippians 3

“Exercise of Joy”

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Peace! I pray you are doing well. This morning I want to talk about joy. Joy is a substance in our lives that is often conflated and mistaken for happiness. Indeed you can experience happiness and joy at the same time but there is something long-lasting about joy.

Happiness is a wonderful feeling that we get to visit from time to time but we don't live there. If we told people we were happy all of the time they would look at us as if we weren't paying attention to our surroundings. Permanent happiness in the midst of difficulties and tragedies sounds numb and out of touch. Joy, on the other hand, is a place where we live not just visit. Joy is that substance that keeps us going through difficult times. It's the good soil where hope can thrive. It's the guarantee behind encouragement, endurance, and the ability to keep going. I grew up in a church where the elders used to say “this joy that I have, the world didn't give it, the world can't take it away.” Friends, protect your joy. But don't just stop there. Don't keep joy's wife in only one room in the house. Undoubtedly there is joy all throughout scripture but this book reminds me of the difference between joy and happiness. I wanna talk with you today about what it looks like when we understand our life with Christ as an exercise of joy.

Paul writes, “Finally, my brethren rejoice in the Lord. For me to write the same things to you is not tedious, but for you, it is safe.” And what that really says to me is the sense of

what it means to have responsibility for somebody, responsibility for their joy, means to be tender towards someone in your care.

There are certain things that we can do to make sure we are taking care of each other's joy. If you are a parent, if you are taking care of your own parents, you are a teacher, someone who has responsibility in the community, you make sure that people are all right. Being responsible for other people means that there are things, tasks, and responsibilities that you're going to do all the time. And when you do fulfill those responsibilities with joy in mind, it doesn't seem tedious.

For example, for 180 days a year, I wake my kids up to go to school. Add in weekends where we're going to church or times when we are going on a family trip. I don't know if I wake them up 365 days a year. There's probably some days where they are just popping up on their own but anyway you slice it, there are a lot of days where the same work of waking them up is happening again and again. It becomes a sort of routine. My wife and I know that it is up to us to wake them up and get them ready for each day. We are doing this again and again and again. And it's not tedium, right? You may be sleepy yourself when waking them up but you're certainly not bored. There's an unspoken gratitude in seeing your child wake up every morning. A gratitude that underwrites this responsibility with tenderness. What does it mean for us to live with one another demonstrating this sort of tenderness? This sort of commitment to each other's joy?

Imagine the world we would have with an outbreak of thoughtfulness. A world where it was commonplace to demonstrate the sort of intentionality that made protecting each other's joy routine? Living our lives with the sense of what is ultimately for your neighbor's benefit. This sort of living requires us to place a premium on consistency. It's not saying you look out for your neighbor's joy once in a while, or even when you feel like it. It's understanding joy as a discipline.

Looking at your neighbor and saying I refuse to let the adversary have the last word over my neighbor's life. It's a commitment to praying for your neighbor to be blessed. Praying for them to have the sort of joy that flows from knowing everything will be alright. In spite of the circumstances. In spite of what things look like. In spite of what we are going through. We have neighbors waiting for transplants. Neighbors whose loved ones are fighting illness. Neighbors wondering what their next meal will be. So when we speak about joy we aren't being flippant. We aren't oblivious to the real suffering happening on an everyday basis. These heavy situations cannot be traversed without tanks full of joy. No doubt that happiness, in the midst of such circumstances, is fleeting. But we cannot afford to let go of our joy. We cannot afford to let despair have the last word. To let our neighbors be destroyed without any recourse. Our neighbors need to know there's more to the story than their lowest moment. We need a discipline that practices joy on a regular basis so that we are ready for the crises of life. This, my friends, is a core responsibility for us who follow Christ. We are living lighthouses. Gently guiding our neighbors in seas of uncertainty and calamity. What does it mean for us to really take on this lighthouse mentality? It's remarkably countercultural to think of others consistently. At times, I confess I am

frustrated with the fatigue we have when it comes to taking care of one another. It is like we are in a marathon with a 40 yard dash mentality! You can easily hear the adage of putting on your oxygen mask first but we are collectively forgetting to then put the oxygen mask on our neighbors. There are some calamities that mere self-help cannot address. This is where Paul's words in verses seven through nine truly speak to me. Where Paul says, "but what things were gained to me, these I have counted lost for Christ. Yes, yet indeed, I also count all things lost for the excellence of the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord, for whom I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish, that I may gain Christ, be found in him, not having my own righteousness, which is not from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness which is from God by faith." These words give me a new understanding of detachment. In the past I have dabbled in detachment, attempted asceticism. I've tried to have as few possessions as possible. But I failed to detach in the manner that would make greatest impact. I had not yet considered how my sense of dignity, my sense of self-worth, and accomplishments are attached to the possessions, attached to my status in life. It is not our attachments to things or prestige that makes us. It is our attachment to the one in whom we live, move, and have our being. And it is this attachment through which we are able to attach to others. So when we talk about protecting our neighbor's joy, we can do so because we are attached to the source of all joy. We are attached to the one whom Richard Smallwood describes as "the center of our joy." Without this attachment, without this central focus of our life, we will be lost. And I struggle to think of a greater tragedy than a lost person trying to show somebody else the way.

Things will be difficult. Life is difficult even without this aforementioned arduous task but friends I want to encourage you to hold on. I want to encourage you to "press

toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus” as Paul shares in verses 13 and 14. Our exercise of joy is resistance training. Building through tearing down. Building by nourishing. Building by rest. And building by heavy lifting. It is work to overthrow our own selves as the centerpiece of our lives. Our flesh goes into chaos when we are not the star of the show. But we must decrease so that Christ increases in our lives. Decrease so that love becomes our signature. Nourish ourselves by reading scripture daily, spending time in prayer, and learning from and alongside in discipleship. Resting in the promises of God. Resting in who God says you are. Resting in the promise that Jesus gave us that He would be with us even until the end of the age. It is these things that allows us to do the heavy lifting. These things that allow us to have joy even when the world is falling apart. These things that allow us to lift up our neighbor, encourage our neighbor, share a ministry of presence when there are no words. Lord forgive us for every time we have tried to pour from an empty cup. For every time we have tried to fill our cup with that which does not satisfy. My prayer for us today is that we not only thirst for living water but that God empowers us to bring our neighbors to the well. That this joy we have bubbles up in our contexts like a peroxide. Cleansing us, making us whole, giving us what we need to exercise joy and run this race well. God bless you, God keep you, Amen.