

Joy

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[0 : 00] As a church, we're following a series looking at how we can grow as human beings in Jesus Christ and drawing particularly on something that comes up in one of Paul's letters where Paul talks of fruit of the Spirit.

It's an image that just as fruit grows gradually, so we have this vision within the New Testament that during the course of our lives, God wants to continue growing things, spiritual realities within our lives.

And there is a list, not of different fruits, it's not the plural, it's a singular. When Paul talks about fruit of the Spirit, spiritual fruit, he talks about fruit but with different aspects of that fruit.

So the idea is that as we grow as Christians, all of these things actually grow as reality in our lives. Love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control.

Today we're thinking specifically about joy. Our Gospel reading, which Carolyn is going to bring to us now, picks up halfway through a piece of narrative in Luke's Gospel.

[1 : 25] Just to paint the picture. Jesus has been talking to his disciples about how being a Christian can be difficult. He warns them, it's going to be tough, they're not in for an easy ride. Then he prays for them and sends them out to go and to preach, to take the message of good news to people and to pray for people that they may be healed.

And depending on which exact translation of Scripture you use, either 70 or 72 of these people that Jesus has sent out, they come back to Jesus really excited over the things that have been taking place as they went out to minister to people.

And so we're going to join the story in Luke chapter 10 as the disciples come back and tell Jesus everything that they have seen and heard. Carolyn is going to read to us from Luke chapter 10, verse 17.

Thank you, Carolyn. C.H. Spurgeon was a Baptist preacher and scholarly writer of the 1800s. He was training a group of people to become preachers. He was speaking to them one day about the importance of facial expression when preaching and he said to them, when you're talking about heaven, then your faces should be full of joy.

[2 : 57] They should express that sense of joy and happiness. You should look bright. You should look alive and full of joy. When you're preaching about the subject of hell, well, then your normal faces will do.

Don't know about you, but I find coming to think about joy as a fruit of the Spirit, coming to think of it as something that God expects, expects to grow in us as Christians alongside these other things, I find that, in fact, the most challenging and the most difficult thing.

And the reason why I find it so challenging and so difficult is I look at the other eight. There's nine in this list. I look at the other eight. Love, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.

All of those seem to have something in common that joy does not. Because I think of those things, and I think even though I might not feel those things deep inside of me, I can understand how God actually can enable me by his grace to discipline those things.

So those things could be realities, even though they might not match the way I, or indeed any of us, feel. Just think about it for a moment. Love. Now, you might not feel love.

[4 : 26] Love can be a feeling, but it's much more than that. And I think we can all kind of get that, that there will be times when love kicks into action, when you don't perhaps feel it inside, but you know what the right thing is to do.

Love makes sacrifices, even when it might not feel an emotion inside. Peace. You might not feel at peace, but it's something that somehow you can kind of give, you can bring that about in people, in

others.

Patience. You might not feel inwardly like being patient, but it can become an action that you're willing to wait, even though it's hard. Kindness. Again, you may not feel like it, but you can do it. Goodness. The same can be said of that. And faithfulness. And gentleness. Self-control. All of those things can be regarded as disciplines, as things that God's Holy Spirit can nurture in us, even when the way we feel inside is telling us something very different.

But joy, it strikes me, is quite different. It stands out on its own, because I can't think of joy and think of anything other than an apparent feeling and an emotion.

[5 : 40] And so I think to myself, how do I make sense of that when I just don't feel it inside? Get this from the words of the Methodist funeral service, okay?

This is some of the words that are said in the service book at the beginning of a Methodist funeral. In the presence of death, Christ offers us sure hope, sorry, sure ground for hope and confidence and even joy.

Now think how the average feeling, the place on the sort of emotional clock is at your average funeral.

Most people, I would say, are probably not in this kind of emotional state that we would describe as joy at that moment in our lives. And yet it is there, clearly, in our liturgy.

And if we tended to think that this is only some kind of secondary thing as far as New Testament teaching is concerned, think again. Because the word joy comes up approximately 60 times in the New Testament.

[6 : 54] And the summons to rejoice comes up closer to 70 times in the New Testament. So this is no minor thing. So as I read this, it challenges me to the core because I think, how do I make sense of those times when I don't feel a sense of joy inside and yet it would seem that if God's Holy Spirit is active within me, there is an expectation on God's part that it ought to be a reality.

How do I make sense of that? How do I make sense of that? For one thing, I'm challenged as to how I understand joy.

Because I'm tempted to think of it as a feeling, as an emotion. Of course it can be. But when I set it alongside those other eight gifts of the Spirit, fruit of the Spirit, sorry, love, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control, it would seem that there is something that goes beyond emotion and feeling.

So let's be quite clear, joy, whilst it can be an emotional feeling, it's got to mean, got to mean something deeper than that.

C.S. Lewis talked about joy as something closer to a sense of yearning, a sense that we look in our lives and we see the realities and our lives darkened by circumstances, but there's something deep within us that knows, yearns for something different and better and senses that actually there can be and there will be.

[8 : 42] And it's not reality yet, but it will be. And it's that sense, that point of tension that actually we can describe as that sense of joy. It's not always apparent, but it's there.

It's there. It's there. But what about that kind of contrast that we see between stuff going on in our lives, the way we feel, and that challenge to joy, to have joy?

Well, what I want to suggest is perhaps it is precisely in that contradiction or that apparent contradiction between how we feel and what we read in Scripture that actually gives us a practical way forward.

Let me say a bit more about what I mean by that. A couple of weeks ago when I was preaching here before, I made reference to a great Christian leader called Dr. Martin Lloyd-Jones.

He was, for over 30 years, pastor of Westminster Chapel in London. And Martin Lloyd-Jones, who came from medical background, in 1964, 1965, preached a series of sermons over the course of a year at Westminster Chapel, which eventually became published in the book *Spiritual Depression*.

[10 : 06] And in that book, even though it was written over half a century ago now, it still speaks to our contemporary world, I would say. He takes, as his central theme, this idea that we spend too much time listening to ourselves.

We spend too much time listening to our emotions and what our inner feelings are telling us.

Whereas, Martin Lloyd-Jones says, we need to spend less time listening to ourselves and more time talking to ourselves.

Now, when he said that, he didn't mean talking to yourselves in the sort of way that, I don't know about you, but if I'm honest, I do. If I'm on my own, and I'm saying, Russell, what are you doing? Why did I come upstairs?

What did I come into this room for? Oh yeah, I think I'll make myself a cup of coffee. He's not talking about that kind of talking to yourself. He actually says, we need to preach to ourselves. And what he means by that is, we don't just present our own thoughts to ourselves.

Instead, we actually take the words of Scripture, even though, no, precisely because they stand in stark contradiction with the way we feel, and we bring those truths of Scripture to bear on our circumstances and on our feelings.

[11:27] He says this, instead of allowing the future and thoughts of it to grip you, talk to yourself. Remind yourself of who you are and what you are and of what spirit is within you.

And having reminded yourself of the character of the spirit, you will be able to go steadily forward, fearing nothing, living in the present, ready for the future, with one desire only, to glorify him who gave his all for you.

Rather than allowing our culture, allowing our circumstances and our feelings to dictate things, we need to draw on God's living word precisely because it contradicts our feelings, our circumstances and our culture.

I read a book not that long ago called *The Happy Christian*. Now, if that sounds a bit trivial to you, it's actually quite a serious book. It was written by a guy called David Murray who's a professor of practical theology and he looks at two things.

He looks at the theology of joy and happiness and he also looks at the psychology, what is known in psychology as positive thinking, as a serious science. And he makes a number of really, really interesting observations and he begins his discourse on *The Happy Christian* by citing some research, not, this isn't theological research, this is psychology.

[13:10] Psychology which says that apparently, and I acknowledge that it's not that easy to sort of quantify these things, but it's generally reckoned by positive psychologists that our circumstances generally only account for about 10% of our state of mood.

10%. So by circumstances it could be financial well-being, it could be the state of relationships, how happy you are in your job, in your work, how happy you feel at home.

Generally speaking, the circumstances, things external to yourself, those things generally only account for about 10% of your state of mood on average at any given time.

So what about the other 90? Well get this, it's reckoned that about 50%, yes, half, half of our mood is set genetically.

It's in your DNA. You can't do anything about it, it's at a lower base, it will move a little bit like that, but generally speaking, all of us have about ourselves a state of psychological disposition that can sort of change, but it's always going to be at a certain ground base.

[14:32] Now that may bring you comfort, it may not, but that is generally, I can't emphasise strongly enough, generally reckoned as a broad brush figure.

So the mathematicians among us will be thinking, what were the other 40%? The other 40%, it is reckoned, of our mood is connected directly to our daily choices and the way that we choose to think.

That's quite a wake-up call, isn't it? Now you could think that's only 40%, or you could think actually, 40%, that's a huge chunk. If it is the case that the way we feel can be changed, 40%, that's a massive, massive slab of our mood.

can be changed by the way we choose to think. Boy, that's huge. That's huge. So, with that in mind, what might it be about the Christian gospel, what might it be that may stand in stark contradiction to our circumstances and how we would feel about things otherwise, what might it be that we can bring to bear on ourselves and on our moods?

Well, I took my time getting to it, but it's here I want to turn to the reading from Luke's gospel that Haraline read to us just now. And the reason we chose this particular passage, and you might be thinking, what on earth has this got to do with joy?

[16:18] Because we've got the story of Jesus who sends out his disciples, they come back, they're saying, isn't this amazing, Lord, that even the demons submit under your name and your authority, isn't this great, we're seeing healings going on, this is absolutely amazing, and then Jesus responds to it, what's that got to do with joy?

This is what it's got to do with joy. In the gospels, this is reckoned to be the only incident recorded where we see joy in Jesus.

Now, of course, we can point to other places where there's references to it indirectly, for example, in John's gospel, John 15, where Jesus is praying that my joy may be in you.

But this is the only actual incident where we see Jesus rejoicing, and it is specifically stated that he was full of joy.

Now, that's interesting because three times we're told that Jesus wept, and yet only one incident in Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John where we're told specifically and explicitly that Jesus was full of joy and was rejoicing.

[17 : 29] I don't think that's any accident. There must be a reason why it is singled out. So what might that reason be? Well, think of the context.

Jesus' disciples, and there's 70, 72 of them, come back and are talking about all the amazing things that have been happening. but Jesus says to them, do not rejoice that the spirits submit to you.

In other words, don't make your source of joy the practical things that are going on, even if they are amazing. But, he says, rejoice that your names are written in heaven.

And then we're told that Jesus, full of joy, and the Holy Spirit said, I praise you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth. You see, it's not what we do, even if it's amazing Christian ministry, even if you go off and you pray for people and they are healed, Jesus says that's nothing.

Don't rejoice over that. It is nothing by comparison to the fact that your names are written in heaven. In other words, it's your identity.

[18 : 46] It's who you are in Christ. Now, I've already told you several times, I'll say it again in case you haven't gone, I struggle with joy. There are times when I feel down, I feel low, and I feel, where is this joy?

How can I get it? But there's something about Christian identity that I find, even in those hardest moments, I sense it's when I begin to connect with that truth and think about it, that even when life may be at its worst, you know, that doesn't go away.

There is always that thing there in our identity as Christians that gives us joy. Back to C.S. Lewis' yearning, that sense of longing, no matter what circumstances might be like, no matter how we might be feeling emotionally, when we come back to that truth, that our names are written in heaven, that God loves us, that you are a child of God, it is something that nothing can take that away, nothing.

One final story. It's a true story. In the late 1930s, a man called John Blandford walked into a library in New York.

[20 : 05] He was going through the books on the shelves, pulling them out and browsing through them, when he noticed in one particular book on the fly leaf, there was a signature.

Somebody had written her name. The woman was called Hollis Maynell. And not only did it have her name, it had her address. Well, he borrowed the book and he kept looking at this and his curiosity got the better of him.

He eventually wrote to Hollis Maynell at the address. A few weeks passed and he had a reply. To cut a long story short, this led to a friendship. They became pen pals and they wrote to one another. Eventually, the Second World War broke out and he was called up to go and fight in Europe. During that time, as a soldier, he continued to write, to exchange letters with Hollis Maynell.

He realised over the months, he was becoming more and more attracted to this woman that he had never seen but only read her letters.

[21 : 12] He asked for her to send him a photo but she refused three times. Eventually, John Blandford was on leave one Christmas and so he wrote to Hollis and said, is there any possibility that we could meet up?

She wrote back and agreed. And she arranged, she agreed to meet at Grand Central Station in New York. He asked her, how will we recognise one another?

He said, I will be wearing my soldier's uniform and I'll be holding a copy of that book and I'll hold it in the air. But how will I recognise you? Hollis wrote back and said, I will be wearing a red rose.

Now, rather than me try and tell the story, let me give it to you in the words of the man himself.

Finally, the day came. I walk into Grand Central Station.

There are hundreds of people milling around. I'm searching for this woman who has captured my heart and suddenly out of the crowd steps a young woman. She has long fair hair and is dressed in

green.

[22 : 27] It seemed as if springtime was bursting out of her. I was captivated, so captivated I omitted to notice that she was not wearing a rose.

She smiled at me. She jiggled her hips and as she walked by she looked back and said, go in my way, soldier. I was about to follow her but suddenly out of the corner of my eye I saw the woman wearing the rose.

she was older, much older than I had thought she would be. She had a little knitted hat on to keep out the cold and a long brown overcoat that made its way down to sensible flat brown shoes.

She wore little round glasses and carried a silver tipped cane. I desperately wanted to go after the young woman in green but then I thought, no, no, this lady has sustained me through the long months of the war.

This won't be romance but it might be something deeper. I did not hesitate. I walked up to the woman with the rose and said, my name is John Blanford, you must be Hollis Manel, could I take you to dinner?

[23 : 50] The elderly lady half smiled, half scowled. Young man, she said, I have no idea what all this is about but the young woman in green who just went by begged me to wear this rose.

And she said that if you were to invite me to dinner she will be waiting for you in the big restaurant across the road.

Apparently, young man, it was some kind of test. True story. Now, she may have been good looking but boy was she clever.

You see, she was bright enough to know that though she might have been very physically attractive, the time would come when looks will pass. She knew and she understood that there is something far deeper, far more profound about human relationships than the way that we look. She knew that and she prized it. When Jesus says, rejoice because your names are written in heaven, he's talking about a relationship.

[25 : 13] He's talking about a relationship with one that we cannot see now. He's talking about a relationship that is the most important relationship that anybody can ever talk about and ever have.

He's talking about a relationship that throughout the course of our lives we will never ever actually see what that other party in that relationship looks like. Why?

Because that relationship, and remember it's the most important one, is hidden. Hidden away and out of sight. it's precisely because of that, that by faith, when we just touch on it, just for a moment, we can find joy like nothing, nothing else.