

JOY In Community

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- [0 : 0 0] let me add my welcome. My name is Sam. I'm one of the pastors here at St. Paul's. And as you've heard multiple times tonight, we're kicking off a new series. We're going to spend some time in the book of Philippians. And the series is entitled Joy for Everyone. This series is going to be about the search for joy. It's going to be about fighting for joy. It's going to be about trying to take hold of the joy that God has built into the Christian life. But like so much that is in the Christian life, it's going to be simple, but not easy. It's going to require change. It's going to require repentance. It's going to require discomfort. It will also require a willingness on our part to recognise that often we are our own barrier. So we are often the biggest barrier to our own happiness, our own joy. So we're going to need some honest reflection. But on offer is what Peter describes in the New Testament as an inexpressible and glorious joy. And I think we're going to find it waiting right in front of us. So before we begin, let's ask God to open our eyes, to fill our hearts and lives with joy so that others might come to know the kind of satisfaction that's only found in Jesus. Father God, please open our eyes and our hearts that we might hear you speak tonight. Shape us by your spirit to be the joy-filled community that you have designed us to be. Amen. Do you ever feel lonely in a crowd? So you're completely surrounded by people, yet at the same time alone? Do you ever feel isolated even when you're among your friends? They're there, but you just don't feel connected. Do you ever feel like that here at church, surrounded by brothers and sisters in Christ? We love family language here. And yet somehow you still feel lonely.
- [2 : 1 1] It's possible to be in proximity with people all the time without actually having any deep connection, or at least no connections with the people that you're with. I've got friends you might say, they're just not here at church. God tells us in the Bible that he has designed this community to be the place where you find your deepest connections, to be the place where you get joy, where you have rich relationships. But I know that for some of us, that's just not how it feels. That's just not our experience. And this letter that Paul has written to the Philippians is a letter that's just saturated with joy. Their relationship seems to be this just fount of encouragement and love in spite of challenging circumstances, in spite of the distance in their relationship, in spite of spiritual opposition. These guys just have a relationship that produces joy for everyone involved. I mean, we're only 11 verses in to this book. We're going to work our way through it. We're 11 verses in, and already there is, you get this sense there's some serious love going on between Paul and this church. I mean, he's over the top in these first 11 verses.

He says, I thank my God every time I remember you. In all my prayers, I always pray with joy because of your partnership. I have you in my heart. God can testify how I long for you with all the affection of Christ Jesus. There's real intimacy and love in those words. I mean, if you are planning a love letter or an encouragement letter to somebody who matters in your life, the bar has just been raised. I don't know if any of you have come across the children's book, Guess How Much I Love You. It's a great book, and it has a little nut brown hair and a big nut brown hair. And the big nut brown hair is the dad, and they're going back and forward with the book beginning with little nut brown hair saying, guess how much I love you. And big nut brown hair says, I don't think I could guess that. And little nut brown hair says, well, I love you as high as I can reach. And then big nut brown hair looks down at him and says, well, I love you as high as I can reach.

And they go back and forth, outdoing each other with their love, trumping each other. And it's escalating until just before little nut brown hair is about to fall asleep, he gazes up into the night sky and spots the furthest thing that he can see. And he says, I love you all the way to the moon. At this point, big nut brown hair responds simply with, wow, that is far.

The affection in these first 11 verses, the love between Paul and this church and from this church back to Paul is a to the moon and back kind of love. It's a relationship that is treasured in both directions. Both parties have just this love and benefit from being in relationship with one another.

[5 : 28] And you read that and you think, isn't that kind of the relationships that we want here as a church family? Wouldn't it be amazing to have that level of richness? And yet at the same time, it's kind of intimidating. I mean, I don't know if any of my friends, not just here, but anywhere would speak about me with this level of love and appreciation. Paul and the Philippians have this incredible connection to one another, but there's actually a whole bunch of reasons why they shouldn't have such deep connections. In the passage that Jimmy read out for us from Acts 16, we get the beginning of the church in Philippi. And it's not the whole story, but we're told about three conversions.

You've got Lydia. She's some sort of wealthy, probably Asian fashionista. You've then got a demon possessed slave girl, and then you've got the head jailer. So rich, you know, flamboyant, fancy, upper class person, demon possessed slave girl, and kind of rough around the edges, tradie.

There is no scenario on earth that has those three people hanging out in a room together, let alone having rich, deep, beneficial relationships, not to mention Paul, who's a random Jewish tent maker who just kind of swans in and out as he's travelling past. That's not the recipe for deep connection. The richness of their relationships is not natural or logical. They're not from the same backgrounds. They don't have the same interests or hobbies. They wouldn't even hang out in the same parts of town. And yet somehow they are bound together. Somehow they are a source of encouragement and joy in one another's lives. And there's only one thing substantial enough to take that mishmash of people and connect them, make them into a community. And it's there in verse three. I thank my God every time I remember you. In all my prayers for all of you, I always pray with joy because, because of your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now. It's the gospel.

That's the common ground. And whenever you read the word gospel in Philippians, it's shorthand. Paul's wrapping up a whole bunch there. It's shorthand to say, it's the good news that Jesus came and died for unworthy people, that he rose again and he offers to forgive people and adopt them into his family.

It's these people having received that love, that forgiveness, that adoption, that grace. Jesus is the thing that can take completely different people and make them a family.

[8 : 20] Jesus is the thing that has the power to draw people together and connect them to God. See, the picture we get here in this first half of Philippians 1 is the gospel-shaping relationships in three specific ways. And it's what I want to focus on for the rest of tonight.

Firstly, the gospel establishes gospel connections in their relationship. So every relationship that you have in life, every single relationship that you have in life, has some point of connection, has something that's common to both parties, which is the foundation for your relationship. So it could be that you work in the same place.

And so you're in proximity with each other for five days a week and for eight hours a day and you get regular interaction. That could be a point of connection. It could be that you both like the same sports team and so you journey together through the highs and lows that go with that. It could be that you have the same taste in music and so you go to concerts together. You share new music that you've discovered.

It could be that you have the same parents. It could be that you have a cause that you believe in and so you share that concern. Maybe you even serve together doing it. It could be that you have multiple points of connection, but it stands that for every relationship there has to be connection. There has to be a thing that joins you. And here's why this matters. This is really important. The strength of connection, the depth of relationship, the quality of friendship is directly proportionate to the significance of the thing that connects you. Say that again because that's a mouthful on a cold Sunday night. The strength of connection, the depth of relationship, the quality of friendship is directly proportionate to the thing that connects you.

So in other words, if your connection is that you catch the same bus each day, so you've got a bus friend, person you sit with on the way to work or the way to school or whatever it is, that's not significant. Catching that bus is in a big part of who you are or your identity and so when you stop catching that bus, that connection will probably fade or disappear. Your bus friend will be done unless you've found another point of connection that can somehow endure. But if your connection is something major, something significant, like maybe it's a shared traumatic experience, maybe it's something that's close to your heart that you both care about, there's a good chance that even when there's distance in your relationship, even when there's less time spent together, that the connections remain strong because the point of connection is more important to you and so the relationship is more substantial.

[11 : 18] Now, we need to understand what it means as people of God to be connected by the gospel. We need to understand what it actually means when we use phrases like brothers and sisters in Christ.

I mean, look at the way, the shape of the relationship between Paul and the Philippians in these passages. In verse 3, Paul thanks God for the Philippians. It's not, thanks guys, you're awesome, I'm so encouraged by you, thanks for the money that you've given me and all that. It's, I thank God for you.

God is the direction that he's focusing on. The connection between the two of them is through God. And then even when he's expressing his affection back to them and not his appreciation of what he's received from God, he says in verse 8, I long for you with the affection of Christ Jesus.

Again, it's through God. That's the point of connection. The warmth and love and closeness and encouragement that Paul has for them is through Jesus. He loves them the way Jesus does.

Gospel connections are Jesus' connections. That's the foundation for any gospel relationship. See, sometimes when we think about our relationships with other Christians, we think about them as being connected to God a bit like a triangle.

[12 : 46] So this is me and I'm connected to God. There's the line of connection. You're over here and you're connected to God as well. And then we add this third line of connection, which is related, but somehow separate. That's not the picture here in Philippians 1.

That's not what's going on. It says that I'm connected to God by Jesus. By his death and resurrection, I'm connected to God. And if you're a follower of Jesus, you are connected to God by Jesus' death and resurrection. We are actually drawn together in God. There's not separate stands. It's all part of the one connection. Our relational link is Jesus. God is in every relationship between Christians.

He is the source of every relationship between Christians. He is the foundation for it. He is the enduring strength of it, which means no other point of connection comes close.

Because there is nothing more significant in the life of a Christian than the God who has called them and loved them and forgiven them and brought them into his family. He is our defining reality.

In him, we've been recreated for his purposes. Our lives belong to him, which means every other thing in our life kind of fades when it comes to significance. And so for God's people, it actually doesn't matter if you're the same age as me. It doesn't matter if you're the same marital status as me. It doesn't matter if you like the same music or food, if you spend your recreational time doing what I do, if you vote liberal or labor. It doesn't matter if you were born in the same country, if you speak a different language, if you eat the same food that I like, if you earn more money than me, if you dress like me. It doesn't matter. Because the most significant thing in our lives is the same.

[14 : 46] We're connected by the thing that matters most to us, Jesus. We are both loved, both forgiven, both adopted through Jesus' death and resurrection. We are both on the same journey towards heaven. We both have the same call on our lives to live in all things for the glory of God. That's gospel connection. Now, the other option, and maybe the habit we fall into, is to focus on and build our relationships based on the more peripheral connections.

They're still real. They're still valid. But instead of going, the connection between us is Christ, we build relationships based on the connection of the fact that we're in this building at the same time, once a week together.

Or that we do dress the same. Or like the same music. Or follow the same sports team. Or live in the same area. But what happens is, if we settle for those weaker connections, our church relationships end up just being poor imitations of the rest of our relationships.

Because we've lost sight of what actually makes Christian relationships unique. Jesus. The gospel. When the gospel is the centre of a Christian relationship, when Jesus is the connection point, every relationship built on him is an opportunity for you to encounter the source of all joy, Jesus himself.

If Jesus is the thing that draws us together, if he's the foundation, if he's the means by which we have a connection, every interaction in that relationship is an opportunity to encounter Jesus.

[16 : 45] The gospel shapes relationships by being our point of connection, and it transforms them into opportunities to encounter the all-satisfying saviour, Jesus.

But he won't be displayed through the perfection of your relationship, or through the perfection of the people you're relating to. The second way that the gospel is going to shape our relationships, the second way that it's impacted Paul and the Philippians, is by giving them gospel perspective.

So first, it helps them to see the gospel connection, but second, it gives them gospel perspective. Now, even though this letter gives us a glimpse of what is clearly a pretty incredible relationship between a church family, it is far from perfect.

You can be assured that neither Paul nor the Philippians are under any illusions about the other. In fact, what Paul rejoices in in this passage is the incompleteness of the Philippians, is their unfinishedness.

Have a look at verse 6. Just after going on about thanking God all the time and praying with joy, he says, Being confident of this, that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus.

[18 : 07] Their work's in progress. Paul looks at the Philippians, and he says there's lots that's great here. Even when he prays in verse 9, and he prays for more love and more knowledge and more insight, that's assuming there's already some love and some knowledge and some insight.

So in this one section, Paul can give thanks for them and get joy from them and celebrate all that's good and pray that they would grow because they need to.

That's gospel perspective. It's the recognition that we are connected to imperfect people who are just as in need of grace as we are. Gospel perspective creates safe relationships where you can fail, where you can fall short, where you can let one another down, and where you can find grace in those moments of failure.

Gospel perspective gives you the chance to be who you really are in relationship. No pretending. No pretense.

It enables genuine relationship. As I was preparing this message today, and in honesty probably for longer, God has been challenging me on this issue specifically.

[19 : 27] I think that I would describe myself as someone who is relationally weak, and there's a whole bunch of baggage there to unpack, but as I was preparing this week, I was convicted that this is one of my big challenges relationally.

Being willing to entrust myself in all my unfinishedness to other people. Being willing to trust the grace of God to the point where I'm okay with you knowing the rough edges in my life.

I don't know if this is your struggle, but for me personally, I can give you the illusion of vulnerability by sharing the things that I'm comfortable with sharing.

The things that I've put into the category of, I'm happy for everyone to know this, even if they're slightly more personal than you might expect. But the things that I'm embarrassed about, I'm not telling you those.

That's what vulnerability is. It's a willingness to share the things that are sensitive. And in my life, I'm not good at it.

[20 : 39] But gospel perspective gives me permission. Because it says, even if you struggle with how to process that, even if you react in a way that might not be exactly how I want you to react, I have grace in Jesus, who's in the middle of our relationship.

Which means even as you respond in a way that might be hard for me, God can empower me to give you grace in your response. And for us together to walk through that challenge, we need to look at other people with gospel eyes, knowing that they are imperfect, knowing that they have their struggles, knowing that their work's in progress.

But also we need to look at ourselves through gospel eyes, unfinished and still in need of grace. We need to be willing to be vulnerable with one another.

Because when we do that, we actually shine Jesus. We shine what it is to be unconditionally accepted to people around us who maybe desperately need that same permission, desperately need to be reminded of that incredible grace that covers all our failures, all our sins.

Maybe we can give permission to a brother or sister to be hurting, to be struggling, to be doubting, to be unfinished, to be a work in progress.

[22 : 00] The gospel gives perspective to our relationships, which enables us to display Jesus to one another. Enables us to shine a light on the author of joy and so to bless the people that we interact with, with what Peter called a joy that is inexpressible and glorious.

And the last way the gospel shapes relationships is by giving them a gospel agenda. This letter is between people who clearly care deeply for one another.

Now what does this incredible love and intimacy and encouragement lead them to talk about? What's their relationship made up of? Verse 5, partnership in the gospel.

Verse 7, the shared grace of defending and confirming the gospel. Verse 8, the affection of Jesus. Now there are a couple of incidental things that get mentioned.

There's a few individuals that get mentioned in this letter. But really, all Paul wants to talk about is Jesus. To those that he cares about most, what he wants to talk about is Jesus.

[23 : 14] He wants to remind them of the gospel so that they get joy. Even in talking about his own struggles and situation, which we're going to look at next week, he does it so that they might get joy about the way the gospel is advancing.

The details of his situation are context to gospel info so that they can get joy and be encouraged. What does he pray for when he thinks of them?

Health? Financial struggles? Weather? Work? Verse 9, this is my prayer, that your love may abound more and more in knowledge and depth of insight so that you may be able to discern what is best and may be pure and blameless for the day of Christ, filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ to the glory and praise of God.

He prays for their growth. His heart's desire is that they make it to the end, that God gets the glory. Now, that's not to say we shouldn't pray for material struggles or health or anything else.

God encourages us to cast all our anxiety on him because he cares for us. But how often are our prayers for one another marked by an earnest desire that we would see growth in one another?

[24 : 42] How much of our conversation with one another is marked with talks of Jesus, talking about what we're learning in the Bible, talking about what God is teaching us and how he's shaping us or struggles that we're having in the Christian life?

Now, it's not to say we can't talk about the weather or the football or whatever else it is that we're talking about. But if this isn't there at all, the gospel is an all-consuming reality.

Gospel connections point us back to what Jesus has already done, point us back to the security we have in God's love. Gospel perspective recognises the tension we have right now as forgiven people who aren't finished yet.

And a gospel agenda lifts our eyes to where we're trying to get to, shows us the end goal. When Jesus returns, God is glorified and finally we will be finished.

It's everything. It's what has been, it's what is, and it's what will be. And so it must be on our lips. It must be in our conversations.

[25 : 56] It must be in our hearts. It must be part of our prayer. It must be in our relationships. God's design and desire for us as a community and for our relationships here at church is that they would be joy-filled, that they would be joy-giving, that they would be deep and they would be rich.

And the key to that is the gospel. The key is Jesus. True, lasting joy is only ever found in Jesus.

This whole series is about Jesus. It's called Joy for Everyone, but it's really about Jesus. You could replace joy with Jesus. They're almost synonyms.

That's how good Jesus is. Don't, because I really like the graphic, but you get the point. It's joy for everyone, but that joy can only ever be found in Jesus.

The search for joy in your life is ultimately a search for Jesus. It's a search to include him and encounter him in all the situations and circumstances and relationships that he has placed you in.

[27 : 03] Nothing can come close to the joy of being loved unconditionally by the one who gave his life for you. Nothing comes close to the joy of certain hope. He is the one you need to be satisfied.

He is the one you need to be content to have joy. And this gospel community, this network of relationships connected by Jesus, being shaped by the gospel, being driven by a gospel agenda, this community of brothers and sisters in Christ, every relationship that he has placed around you here is one of the vehicles that Jesus has chosen to make himself available to you.

He is the source of all joy. Not a great church community, but this community is one of the vehicles that he has chosen to make himself available to you.

So take hold of him. Look again at the people around you.

See past common hobbies, past common location, past common background, and see that what brings you together is the eternal reality that you are loved and forgiven in Jesus.

[28 : 38] This community is God's gift to each of us so that we might encounter and enjoy Jesus with ever-increasing measure until he comes back and we get all of him.

So let's take hold of him. Let's pray. Father God, we ask that you would open our eyes to see what it is that you see, to see brothers and sisters, to see not people who are like us or not like us, but to see fellow recipients of grace.

Enable us to be givers of grace to one another. Empower our relationships to be encouraging and strengthening and joyful and vulnerable and yet safe.

Help our relationships as your people to be a place where we encounter you as you work in those around us. Fill us with joy, Father.

Fill us with a joy beyond our circumstances and shine your infinite worth into a world that is searching for the satisfaction that only you can offer. God, do your work in us so that we might finish the race full of joy and so that you get the glory.

[30 : 14] Amen. Amen. Amen.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

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