

Getting Serious About Being Happy: Strategies for Rejoicing in Real Life
Session IV (Rejoicing in Real Life)

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Happiness: Our Default Attitude toward Life

Give God a standing ovation every day. It's what he's waiting for. It's what you're waiting for too... You won't be happy until your first waking thought is the glory of being alive. You won't be happy until like a little child you can hardly wait to get out of bed and tiptoe downstairs to see what magic awaits you. You won't be happy until you forget your problems long enough to look up to heaven and be stunned into heartfelt thanks for a life overflowing with goodness. -Mike Mason¹

Let's get real: how many of you in your heart of hearts, secretly feel that all this talk about being joyful is wonderful, but in your experience, you just don't see how it's realistic to be glad in God as our default attitude toward life? Do we feel as if life is really more about stoically enduring difficulty, with brief moments of happiness along the way?

We can tell what we really believe by how we live and where we place our attention and effort. Is the idea of being happy most of the time an unattainable ideal? I think this is what many of us do believe, even if we don't admit it to ourselves.

This session I am going to share some practical strategies for what we can do to live more joyfully. But there is a danger here: in focusing on what we can do, we put our attention on ourselves, instead of reminding ourselves of who our Savior is and how he is working salvation *for* us. So please don't think of these ideas as "one more thing" you must do. That will kill joy for sure. If it seems helpful, use it. Otherwise, let it go.

Also, don't beat yourself up for "failing." That would be the opposite of what we are aiming for! Always remember we live by grace, *from* a place of acceptance and love. God's mercies are new every morning, so if you have a bad day, just pick yourself up and start again. God turns even our failures into glory for him and good for us.

Consider George Mueller. He didn't think happiness was naïve or unattainable. He wrote: "The

¹ Mike Mason. (2007). *Champagne for the Soul: Rediscovering God's Gift of Joy*. Vancouver, B.C.: Regent College Publishing. (50)

first great and primary business to which I ought to attend every day is to have my soul happy in the Lord.”²

George Mueller led an incredible life. He accomplished many amazing things, but he is perhaps most known for setting up five orphanages that gave a home to more than 10,000 children in England, never asking anyone for money to fund them. He just prayed for it, and God sent it. He did this because he wanted to glorify God by showing that God could be trusted, and so encourage other believers to take him at his Word. For Mueller, happiness in the Lord was where he directed his first effort every day.³

Seventeenth century Puritan pastor Jeremy Taylor took a more serious tack. He wrote: “God threatens terrible things if we will not be happy.”⁴ Would God really be angry with us if we aren’t happy? Listen to Deuteronomy 28:47-48, where God warns Israel that if they do not obey him *with joy*, they will be cursed:

Because you did not serve the LORD your God with joyfulness and gladness of heart, because of the abundance of all things, therefore you shall serve your enemies whom the LORD will send against you, in hunger and thirst, in nakedness, and lacking everything. And he will put a yoke of iron on your neck until he has destroyed you.

Wow. That’s serious. When we are not joyful in the abundance of all God is for us, he rather takes offense at that. Truly, given the wonderful promises of the gospel, the suffering Jesus endured to purchase our salvation, and all that God continues to do for us, don’t we owe it to Him to be happy?

And yet we have this sin nature to contend with. Anyone who wants to be happy will have to fight for it. Some of us are more temperamentally easy-going or outwardly cheerful than others, but there is no one who doesn’t have to exert effort to stay happy. I’ve been happy and I’ve been unhappy. Happy is better! Isn’t gladness in God worth fighting for?

I will be quoting Mike Mason in his book *Champagne for the Soul* a lot in this session because he has so much practical wisdom. For instance: he compares the command to be joyful with the command to love. He asks, does anyone argue that we should love sometimes but not all the time?⁵ Sometimes people are really hard to love. But do we get a pass? We don’t have to love difficult people? No, “Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.” (1 Cor 13:7) Jesus told us we must love even our enemies. We are called to love at all times.

²<https://www.desiringgod.org/messages/george-muellers-strategy-for-showing-god>

³ Ibid.

⁴ <https://www.desiringgod.org/articles/dissatisfied-contentment>

⁵ *Champagne* (7)

I used to be discouraged by the command to be happy, because it seemed I continually failed to obey it, which of course, made me even more unhappy. But what if the tone was more like this: “Be happy, I have given you everything you need for life and godliness. Your sins are forgiven and you are clothed in my Son’s righteousness. Your future is assured and nothing, not even you, can separate you from my love. I will surely finish the good work in you that I began.” (I wasn’t channeling Jesus, by the way. He did not speak that directly to me. But I was imagining how Jesus might speak to us based on what scripture tells us.) Jesus is more than *something* to be glad about; he is *Someone* to be glad about. Remembering who he is and his promises to us makes us glad all over again.

So yes, let’s aim to be happy all the time. We won’t do it perfectly, but we don’t love perfectly either, and we have not completely conquered sin. And sometimes there is good reason to weep. Still, if you have kids, you know that nothing makes you happier than when your children are happy, obedient, and if you are really blessed, grateful for how you love them and what you do for them. I want to give the Lord that kind of pleasure.

On the other hand, aren’t you exasperated by kids that you work hard to bless, either with a special experience or a gift, and instead of appreciation they complain and compare and demand more? It’s easy to see this in our kids. But the truth is, we aren’t much different. If we aren’t glad in God and thankful, we are really just like spoiled children.

Yes, we will cry and lament when we hurt. We need to. We will experience anger, fear, discouragement. But we won’t stay there, because pain and loss and not even death shall have the last Word. Christ is the First and Last Word. What if we became:

HAPPY WARRIORS

I know women are generally not much into war, but the Bible teaches us that we are in a spiritual war. What if we relished the battle, because we know we can’t lose? We fight *from* victory, not for victory. Christ is in us, the hope of glory.⁶ Mike Mason has more to say on this:

What attitude do you bring to your present sufferings? Can you taste the glory to be won through them...? Joy knows it’s on the winning side. That’s why it can rejoice even in the midst of suffering. While one believer praises God in the midst of terminal illness, another grumbles because of a runny nose. What’s the difference between these two lives? Attitude...In the words of James Birrell, a boy who died of neuroblastoma at the age of eight, “You can’t let cancer ruin your day.”⁷

The Bible tells us to “rejoice always” (1 Thess. 5:16). Again Mike Mason writes:

⁶Colossians 1:27

⁷ *Champagne* (41-42)

One must choose joy, and keep choosing it under all conditions, until gradually it becomes a habit, a self-sustaining reality. Lives change by...making small, hard, daily choices...if you want to be free, commit to joy come what may. Something happens in the face of such a decision. When every option to be gloomy is removed, a profound shift takes place in the soul. Where before there seemed no way ahead, suddenly a path appears. An act of commitment is like having a flashlight in a dark forest...commitment itself lights the way.⁸

This past summer a lot of things went wrong for me, which I should have known would happen when I chose this topic! Very expensive house repairs, spending five weeks of my favorite season inside a dark house with all the drapes closed (because it's awkward walking around your house with a workman's face always in your windows), writing these talks with loud hammering outside, medical bills, irrigation problems, hay problems, the loss or possibly theft of my wedding ring (which was a family heirloom), lots and lots of problems. All of this gave me many opportunities to practice choosing joy. These challenges did throw me, but not for long. I said to the Lord, "OK, I am going to choose to be happy and trust you through this (because after all I was going to have come talk to all of you in a few months)! I determined to be happy in the Lord and trust him, and I found that most of the time, I was.

Just as loving others is our duty whether it is easy or difficult, so is rejoicing in the Lord. So what specifically can we do, after we have made the commitment, as George Mueller did, to make it our business to be happy in God?

PREACH THE GOSPEL TO YOURSELF

True conversion to Christ is always accompanied by joy. But the cares and sorrows and sufferings of this life can steal our joy. How do we get it back? For starters, we remember the good news we have forgotten. That's why Jerry Bridges writes that we must preach the gospel to ourselves every day.⁹ Our sins are forgiven, we are clothed in the righteousness of Christ, and God is with us, so that now "The only thing that counts is faith expressing itself through love" (Galatians 5:6). We are free, and "it is for freedom that Christ has set us free" (Gal. 5:1). What joy!

But what is the gospel? Can you explain it? Lately I've been listening to *White Horse Inn* podcasts, and I commend them to you for your joy. I've learned so much and seen Jesus to be more and more astonishing through these podcasts, especially since they are going through the book of John this year. But in one of their episodes they went to the Religious Broadcasters convention, the largest evangelical gathering in the country. They asked people there, including pastors: "What is the gospel?" In six hours of interviews, only two people could articulate the gospel. Many, if not most, embraced a false gospel of experience and good works.

⁸ Ibid. (56)

⁹ <https://www.challies.com/articles/faith-hacking-preaching-the-gospel-to-yourself/>

What is the gospel? It is a message that comes to us from outside of us, that tells us how an unholy creature can come into the presence of a holy God. Let me ask you a question: does God demand perfection to all who enter his heaven?

The answer is yes. Salvation is always by keeping the law of God perfectly. Stay with me here. Hebrews 12:14 says: "Without holiness no one will see the Lord." Are you holy? I'm not. How do we get this holiness? God does not lower his standards. Immediately we see that we are in trouble. We need forgiveness for our sins, but we also need the righteousness, or holiness, that comes from keeping the law, which we cannot do.

At the cross, Jesus took on himself the wrath we deserved and purchased our pardon for our sins. But that's not the whole story. I didn't understand for many years the significance for ME that Jesus also lived a perfect life without sin, fully keeping the law. I used to think that this just proved his worthiness to pay for the sins of the world. But it is much more than that.

When we put our trust in Jesus, we are justified. This means not only are we treated "just as if we never sinned," because God accepts his Son's sacrifice on our behalf, but we are also treated "just as if we had kept the law." When we come into judgement, we will be clothed in the righteousness of Christ, who fulfilled the law for us. Otherwise, we would be naked, without any righteousness of our own, and we would perish. We are holy because we are *in* Christ, the only Holy One. That is the good news that saves us. Both forgiveness and righteousness imputed to (or credited to) us by faith. Christ is the one who saves, and faith, itself a gift from God, unites us to Christ.¹⁰

What is faith? Biblical Faith includes three aspects: knowledge, assent, trust.¹¹ First we must *know* the message: what is the good news? Then we must agree that it is true; or *assent* to it. But that alone is not saving faith. We must *trust* our whole being to Christ, and live according to our confidence that the message is true. I am not saying we must live perfectly, which is impossible this side of heaven, but we must be *all in*. If we don't live fully committed in this way, we don't have saving faith.

Putting our whole trust in Christ reconciles us to God. He actually comes to live in us by his Holy Spirit. The implications of this new relationship are worked out over our lives. What we never have to worry about again is whether we are "good enough." We aren't. We rely on Christ's goodness. At the same time, saving faith is living and active, and immediately sets about doing good works. It can't help it. The rest of our lives becomes one of learning to live and think and love like Christ: our sanctification, as we are daily conformed to his image and made fit for heaven. But always from the place of love and acceptance by our Father in heaven, who wills only good for us, and makes it happen.

A quick aside about what the joy of the gospel is NOT. It is *not* having a deep experience

¹⁰ <https://www.ligonier.org/learn/devotionals/two-kinds-of-obedience/>

¹¹ <https://www.ligonier.org/learn/devotionals/what-saving-faith/>

with God. You may or may not, but *aiming* for it distorts the gospel by making Christ himself fade into the background, as our *experience* becomes what we seek to prove to ourselves that our faith is real. It also creates anxiety: what if I can't "feel" God?

Scripture does not call us to inward experiences; that is really a revival of the old gnostic heresy where people claimed direct revelation from God without having to go to his Word. Phil Cary wrote one of my favorite books: *Good News for Anxious Christians*. In it he reclaims the true gospel from modern evangelical practices whose aim is intimacy with the Lord, but the result is often anxiety. We worry if we can't "feel" God's presence; does that mean our faith is not real? Has God left me?

When we focus on spiritual experience, we make scripture less important (as we seek God in our hearts instead of in his Word), we make church less important (perhaps we have better experiences with God alone in the forest than in church), and we make Christ himself less important than our own experience. Cary writes, "The turn to experience gets Christians stuck in anxiety...we have to keep wondering what is wrong with us when we are not having the right experiences...The result is like being at a bad party where everybody acts like they are enjoying themselves because they are convinced that's how they are supposed to feel."¹²

I know that I am not the only one who has felt this way, because I've talked to some of you. Believing the gospel does change our experience, beginning with giving us joy, but the *focus* on experience is unbiblical: it encourages self-absorption, causes anxiety, and I believe is an important reason many young people leave the faith. If they stop having deep inner experiences, if their questions are not answered, and they have little biblical grounding, at some point they can't take the anxiety any more, and they give up.

So, before you embark on any other strategies to grow in joy, make sure you know what the gospel is, and have made yourself happy in what Christ has done for you in purchasing your forgiveness and then clothing you with his righteousness, so that you are once and for all his own, whether you feel it or not. Preach the gospel to yourself every day.

On to specific strategies. Many of these are in the "duh" category, but I mention them because when we are downhearted, we often forget the obvious. This list is not exhaustive. So here we go:

MUSIC

Music of course is powerful to lift our spirits. I am still growing in this area. When I was first converted, I got the idea that I should get rid of all my old albums, which I did and now regret, because they were the soundtrack to my life. I didn't connect with a lot of Christian pop music either, so that area of my life, other than singing in church (which I have loved since I was a

¹²Phil Cary. (2010). *Good News for Anxious Christians: 10 Practical Things You Don't Have to Do*. Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press. (190-191)

child), kind of withered for a long time. But I am working on it. Here's what Martin Luther wrote:

"I have no use for cranks who despise music because it is a gift of God. Music drives away the devil, it makes people joyful. They forget thereby all wrath, unchastity, arrogance and the like. Next after theology, I give music the highest place and greatest honor."¹³

The end.

SERVE SOMEBODY

This is obvious but true. Serving others gives us joy. I like what Martin Luther wrote about this too:

"Yes, it is a living, creative, active and powerful thing, this faith. Faith cannot help doing good works constantly. It doesn't stop to ask if good works ought to be done, but before anyone asks, it already has done them and continues to do them without ceasing. Anyone who does not do good works in this manner is an unbeliever...Faith is a living, bold trust in God's grace, so certain of God's favor that it would risk death a thousand times trusting in it. Such confidence and knowledge of God's grace makes you happy, joyful and bold in your relationship to God and all creatures. The Holy Spirit makes this happen through faith. Because of it, you freely, willingly and joyfully do good to everyone, serve everyone, suffer all kinds of things, love and praise the God who has shown you such grace. Thus, it is just as impossible to separate faith and works as it is to separate heat and light from fire!"¹⁴

When we are feeling downcast, we become self-focused. Doing something for someone else, aside from being the mark of true faith, can't help but lift your spirits.

Many years ago a friend told me of a Christmas when she was recently divorced, very sad, because her kids were with their father. She was all alone with no family. Can you imagine how hard that would be? Maybe some of you have been there. She decided to go visit people in the hospital on Christmas Day. She said it turned out to be one of the best Christmases she ever had. If I were in her shoes, I don't think I would have had the courage to do that. But she did, and it inspired me to be more intentional and reach out more often than I might otherwise, as well as to stop feeling sorry for myself and go bless someone instead.

We can't meet every need. But we can do something. I often feel like I have not done enough. I take comfort in Jesus's words about Mary of Bethany: "She did what she could" (Mark 14:8).

¹³ https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=3171

¹⁴ <https://www.ligonier.org/learn/articles/martin-luthers-definition-faith/>

Go Outside

Get outside and look at the incredible beauty and majesty of creation.

Did you ever consider that joy is the pulsating center of all of creation? The world is enchanted, if we have eyes to see. We know God by metaphor: that is, poetically. We don't see him directly, but we see him in creation. Everything, from the awesome expanse of space filled with swirling galaxies to the wonders of the earth with its mountains and forests and deserts and lakes, to teeming life in every environment, full of endless surprises from the tiniest bacteria to the largest animals. The natural order is beautiful in its intricacy and complex working together of it all.

Creation also reminds us of scriptural truth. I look at the mountains and think of Psalm 121: "I lift up my eyes to the hills-- where does my help come from? My help comes from the LORD, the Maker of heaven and earth." The mountains don't change, and neither does God. My garden, which produces so much abundance from a simple seed, teaches me the generosity of God. Jesus is called a sun, a lion, a lamb, a rock, a root out of dry ground. All of these things are available for us to see right here in the Rogue Valley. We even have mountain lions!

When I take time in the outdoors, it reminds me that the secret at the heart of creation is joy. I think that is one reason we all love to spend time outdoors, savoring the beauty in which we live. It gives us joy because it was created *in joy* and *for joy* and *reveals joy*.

And while we are talking about creation, DNA is the foundation of life. DNA is an information instruction code. Science reveals that life itself is word-based. But we knew that didn't we? In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God and the Word was God. This Word of God spoke the universe into existence. Truly, all creation shouts the glory of God. No wonder it says in Job 38 that "the morning stars sang together and all the angels shouted for joy" when God created the universe. The cosmos pulsates with the joy of the Lord.

Spending time in creation not only gives us joy, but rest. To live joyfully, we must rest.

Rest

There is physical rest and spiritual rest. Concerning spiritual rest, much of the fight for joy involves letting go, surrendering to God and his will for us. It means resting in the gospel and resting in God's providential ordering of our lives. Paradoxically, this *rest* takes *effort*. Mike Mason describes it like this:

"Rest is like unclenching a fist: letting go of the need to do or to know, in order that receiving might take the place of grasping."¹⁵

¹⁵ *Champagne* (12)

To cultivate spiritual rest, we need physical rest too. Constant frenzied activity steals joy. One reason we miss joy is because we are too busy to notice it. Mike explains:

One interesting property of happiness is that we cannot be happy without knowing it. We can be many other things – rich, blessed, lucky, loved – and not know it, but to be happy we must know it. The awareness is part of the happiness. Rest is an opportunity to become aware of joy.¹⁶

I tend to be one who is always busy, always productive. I like working. I may also be sinfully trying justify my existence, instead of resting in the One who justifies me. It's hard for me to rest, to do nothing. But I have learned that if I want to be happy, I need to rest.

God commands us a day of rest from our labors. Build times of rest into your whole week as well. Put it on your calendar if necessary. I think of a wise woman I know who marks out time on her calendar, not only for work, family, chores, but also rest. If someone wants something from her during that time, she can truthfully tell them that she has a prior commitment. It's ok to do this. It's commendable. Jesus gave generously but not constantly. He took time to rest, to pray, and so should we.

Writer Anne Lamott says: "Almost everything will work again if you unplug it for a few minutes. Including you."¹⁷

Rest is also connected to repentance.

Repent

*In repentance and rest you shall be saved;
in quietness and in trust shall be your strength. (Isaiah 30:15)*

Rest gives opportunity for repentance. When we are quiet, we become aware of our blessings. We also become aware of our sin. This is a gift from the Lord. If you are convicted of sin, be glad. God is making you more like his Son. What do you do? You repent and believe the gospel. Repentance is seeing how you are wrong, agreeing with God's perspective on it, confessing and turning away from it and toward the Lord. Unforgiveness (includes resentment and bitterness) is probably the biggest sin most of us must put to death, and it poisons everything. Be vigilant against it, and put it off the moment you notice it).

A caveat: some of us have been grievously traumatized as children when we had no emotional resources or skills to deal with it. Most often it is a parent who neglected or actively abused us. This creates all kinds of problems for an adult child of trauma, from a loss of confidence in one's own perceptions, to difficulty knowing where one's self ends and others begin, to rage and grief

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ https://www.ted.com/talks/anne_lamott_12_truths_i_learned_from_life_and_writing?language=en

and anxiety and fear. Children usually stuff their emotions as a matter of survival, but that takes energy, making it hard to learn and grow. We do need to forgive those who have harmed us, including even abusive parents, but to heal, we need to process what happened, to acknowledge the harm that was done, and work through how that impacted us and continues to impact us as adults.

If you have life experience of abuse, you can't heal what you don't acknowledge, so don't try to jump to forgiveness before you are clear on what it is you are forgiving. I can now look at the traumatic experiences of my life without responding emotionally. My past is truly in the past. It took time though. If this speaks to you, understand that when I say "put off unforgiveness the minute you notice it," that is for new offenses. Healing deep wounds of the past takes time and work and love. If your past still haunts you, you may want to work with a Christian counselor to walk with you through this process with Scripture's comfort and promises. God can and will heal you.

Many of us have issues with our parents, because even the best parents are sinners, just like we are. Paul repeated the Fourth Commandment in Ephesians 6:13: "Honor your father and mother—which is the first commandment with a promise— so that it may go well with you and that you may enjoy long life on the earth." When I hated my parents it did not go well with me. For this reason, as my children were growing up, I told them my history and the consequences in my life of not honoring my parents. I told them that as their mother my heart was always to do what was best for them, but that I would likely let them down in important ways, and might not even know it. I explained to them that when this happened, they must forgive me and forgive their father, that it might go well with them in their lives.

One of my greatest joys is that my adult children are not angry people. Oh, they got mad at me. But they learned to forgive. It is such a temptation to resent our parents, because they have authority over us and they also sin against us. When you sin against your children, be sure to confess it and ask their forgiveness, lest you tempt them to resent you. They want to forgive you. Make sure you give them that opportunity, protecting them from bitterness and setting an example for how sinful people can live together in love.

We must not only put off our sin, we must replace it with something better.

Paul teaches us in Ephesians 4:22-24 to

put off your old self, which belongs to your former manner of life and is corrupt through deceitful desires, and be renewed in the spirit of your minds, and put on the new self, created after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness.

Yes, our attitudes, thoughts, and desires can be sinful and deceitful. We need to put them off, and put on Christ, to walk in *his* way.

This is hard to do. In fact, without the Holy Spirit it is impossible. But the Spirit helps us in our weakness. Pray for the desire and the power to do what you ought. And we do this by practicing it, even if we don't feel that way in our heart. That's not hypocrisy, it's how we grow, by obeying even when we don't want to, and trusting that the right feelings and desires will follow. In the 12 Step programs they say, "Fake it till you make it."¹⁸ C.S. Lewis called it "the good kind of pretending." In *Mere Christianity* he explains:

What is the good of pretending to be what you are not? Well, even on the human level, you know, there are two kinds of pretending. There is a bad kind, where the pretence is there instead of the real thing; as when a man pretends he is going to help you instead of really helping you. But there is also a good kind, where the pretence leads up to the real thing.

When you are not feeling particularly friendly but know you ought to be, the best thing you can do, very often, is to put on a friendly manner and behave as if you were a nicer person than you actually are. And in a few minutes, as we have all noticed, you will be really feeling friendlier than you were. Very often the only way to get a quality in reality is to start behaving as if you had it already. That is why children's games are so important. They are always pretending to be grownups—playing soldiers, playing shop. But all the time, they are hardening their muscles and sharpening their wits so that the pretence of being grown-up helps them to grow up in earnest.¹⁹

Sincere repentance in which we receive the forgiveness of God because of the work of Christ, followed by the "good kind of pretending," makes us happy. We feel God's pleasure, and there's nothing better than that.

One surprising thing is that over time we should expect to see more sin in ourselves, not less. This can be discouraging and even alarming. Shouldn't I be doing better by now? Why do I keep doing the same things over and over? Is my faith even real? Often, the reason we don't seem to be making progress is that we have become more sensitive to our sin. As we mature in the Lord, we become more aware of our ugly thoughts, bad attitudes, lack of faith, etc., and we begin to hate our sin more and more. What used to seem like small sins loom large. This is reason to be happy! Unbelievers are indifferent to God. They hide their sin; they don't do battle with it. If you are actively battling sin, that is evidence that you are alive to God. And if you are alive to God, there is no condemnation. You can fight the good fight of faith and know that you have the victory.

True repentance brings joy. Mike Mason asks, "Does knowing the truth about yourself shame or anger you? Or does it bring you profound and happy relief?...The sign that we have repented

¹⁸ <https://www.recovery.org/pro/articles/fake-it-till-you-make-it-helpful-aa-saying-or-dangerous-self-deception/>

¹⁹ <http://merecslewis.blogspot.com/2011/02/lets-pretend.html>

well is happiness.”²⁰ When God first showed me the ugly truth about myself, it filled me with joy, because I felt sure it was for the purpose of showing me the way out. When God reveals to you something ugly about yourself, rejoice! He is disciplining you as his true daughter. When

we receive correction humbly, we are brought closer to the truth and therefore to Christ, and that makes us happy.

When we understand in our bones that our biggest problem in life is ourselves, our biggest issue is sin, that Christ has conquered it and is conquering it in us, then we can have joy no matter what is else is happening. We are reconciled to God, we have meaning and purpose and eternal life, and we have a taste in this life of what that well-being and freedom will mean forever in the kingdom. “At thy right hand are pleasures forevermore” (Psalm 16:11).

But watch out for this:

A Trap

We need to learn how to cultivate self-awareness while avoiding self-focus.

We want to watch ourselves, our sinful thoughts and actions, confessing and repenting of them. The Bible does tell us to examine ourselves. But we need to remember that our thoughts and motives will always be mixed. If you notice an ugly thought, confess it and turn away from it. Tell God you agree with him that it’s wrong. Replace it with the truth and move on. Don’t pay too much attention to it. Satan wants to trick us into becoming obsessed with ourselves, even if it is over our sin. He doesn’t care. Self-focus is at the heart of our sin. We need Christ-focus. We need not to think less of ourselves (“oh, I’m such a sinner”), but to *think of ourselves less*.

I love what Phil Cary says about this in *Good News for Anxious Christians*; he warns us not to get

all tangled up in asking, "Am I loving enough? Am I unselfish enough?...It's as if every decision we made were not really about loving our neighbors...but about our inner motivations- which is to say, it's really about ourselves. And then, on the basis of this relentless focus on ourselves, we're supposed to figure out which of our motivations is the most unselfish....Not only do we almost always have mixed motivations, we often have multiple real motivations...(Therefore) we may ignore our motivations and just try to do what is good....if your desire is to do the best things, then your motivation is good enough...Christian love is about the good of your neighbor, not how good your heart is. (It's not about you.)"²¹

²⁰ *Champagne* (18)

²¹ Phil Cary. (2010). *Good News for Anxious Christians: 10 Practical Things You Don't Have to Do*. Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press. (79-80)

Confession and repentance are so liberating. If our conscience or the devil still accuses us, take the advice of Martin Luther:

When the devil throws your sins in your face and declares that you deserve death and hell, tell him this: "I admit that I deserve death and hell, what of it? For I know One who suffered and made satisfaction on my behalf. His name is Jesus Christ, Son of God, and where He is, there I shall be also!"²²

I don't know about you, but I find it to be really quite a lot of fun to say this to accusing thoughts that trouble me about my sin. You might even say, it gives me joy!

Scripture: Our Weapon of Warfare for Joy

Do you use it? Romans 12:2 tells us: "Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect."

How are our minds renewed? Through abiding in the Word of God. Earlier today, I spoke about the critical importance of reading, knowing, studying, meditating on God's Word. If you want to be happy, read the Word every day. Feed the fire of joy with the kindling of scripture:

This may be the most objectionable thing I have said to you today, but it is the pattern in scripture to commune with God early in the morning. Jesus did it. The psalms speak of it. "Let the morning bring me word of your unfailing love, for I have put my trust in you." (Psalm 153:8)

This sets our hearts and minds in a right frame to face the challenges of the day. It reminds us of God's love and presence, which gives us joy. Remember George Mueller, who believed it of first importance to make himself happy in God before he began his day.

How to Read?

Read scripture devotionally, not merely intellectually. In other words, read it with a desire to be transformed by it, as it convicts and comforts and teaches you.

Don't look first for instructions about what you should do. Instead, look for what God is doing. Look for Christ, who said that all the scripture testifies of him. The Bible reveals who God is, who is his Son, and what he is doing in the grand sweep of history from creation to redemption to restoration: that great day when everything will finally be made right. Look for Christ, to marvel at him. Don't look for where Jesus fits in YOUR story. Look for how you fit into HIS story. Examples or principles for you to follow are there, but our first need is to know God, that we may exult in him.

²²<https://theoldguys.org/2011/04/21/luther-i-admit-i-deserve-death-hell-what-of-it/>

Then, you can let what you are reading reveal sin or unbelief in your life. In what areas of your life are you failing to trust the Lord? How do your thoughts, desires, and behavior need to change?

Don't look so much to getting something *out* of the Bible, look to get the Bible *into* you. Remember Rosaria Butterfield, who said the Bible got bigger inside of her than anything else, and that's when everything changed for her. The Bible is not an instruction manual. It works in us much as music or poetry or literature does; it gets into us and forms our hearts by the Holy Spirit. We experience of God through the mediating work of scripture. (It is not biblical to seek direct revelation, and nowhere is this practice taught in the Bible.)

Some love scripture right away. It was that way for me. I could not get enough of it. That early passion was not sustained forever, just as falling in love becomes more of a steady affection over time. We can't stay ecstatic forever. But I did establish a habit of reading every day and a deep love for God's Word.

For others, love of scripture doesn't happen immediately. It can seem impenetrable. God gave me a dear friend for whom this was true. She loved Jesus but she did not love the Word of God, and was honest enough to say so.

But she persevered and over time, that love developed along with her understanding, and it became a great joy to her. Now she loves the Word and spends chunks of time in it. We are designed to know and delight in the truth. So don't give up. Persevere, pray for understanding, sit under solid teaching in church, get help to understand it, and over time it will feed your soul and birth joy in your heart and life. Daily reading is not legalism; it is faithfulness. It really is foundational to your life in Christ.

If it's not yet a habit, start slow. Fifteen minutes in the morning, read one chapter or one psalm. I like to read all over scripture regularly. It helps me see connections. I rotate each day: gospel, epistle, old testament, psalms, proverbs. This summer we practiced reading large chunks of scripture at a time with the summer reading program. Reading a whole epistle at once is also quite wonderful, and helps you see connections you might otherwise miss if you only read a chapter a day. Reading chronologically is *so* valuable and I recommend you do that at least one time. But start somewhere. God's Word is living and active, and will not fail to have its effect on your heart, making you more like Christ. We become like what we behold, so behold the Lord in scripture every day.

Once children came along, I spent less time. But I got up early, and I did not allow the children to disturb me when I was spending time with the Lord. That was my time. They could stay in their rooms for thirty minutes. Yours can too.

Speak scripture **out loud** to yourself and others. Find scriptures that help you battle anxiety fear, or doubt, and speak them out loud. If you can't remember scripture itself, speak the truth anyway. "I know that you are my fortress and my loving God and you will never leave me."

Speak words of hope and faith. When your ears hear, even from your own lips, your heart is strengthened. And of course my favorite: "I do believe; help my unbelief" (Mark 9:24) Speaking out loud really helps!

Remember that faith is not passive. Jerry Bridges writes in *Trusting God*: "Trust is a vigorous activity of the soul by which we choose to lay hold of the promises of God and cling to them despite the adversity that threatens to overwhelm us."²³ He says we should accept adversity but not anxiety. Too often we do the opposite: we resist adversity and live in anxiety. Battle it with the Word of God. Actively work at trusting what we know to be true.

Why do all this? Because God's Word makes us happy. George Mueller thought so:

But in what way shall we attain to this settled happiness of soul? How shall we learn to enjoy God? How obtain such an all-sufficient soul-satisfying portion in him as shall enable us to let go the things of this world as vain and worthless in comparison? I answer, this happiness is to be obtained through the study of the Holy Scriptures. God has therein revealed Himself unto us in the face of Jesus Christ.

...For the first four years after my conversion I made no progress, because I neglected the Bible. But when I regularly read on through the whole with reference to my own heart and soul, I directly made progress. Then my peace and joy continued more and more. Now I have been doing this for 47 years. I have read through the whole Bible about 100 times and I always find it fresh when I begin again. Thus my peace and joy have increased more and more.

...the most important thing I had to do was to give myself to the reading of the word of God, and to meditation on it...What is the food of the inner man? Not prayer, but the word of God, and...not the simple reading of the word of God, so that it only passes through our minds, just as water runs through a pipe, but considering what we read, pondering over it, and applying it to our hearts.²⁴

Did you catch that? The word of God, not prayer, is our food. We need to pray, but to pray effectively, we need to know God's word. Fill yourself up on God's word, pray as you read, think about it, apply it, ponder it, until it makes you happy.

COURAGE

We talked about this earlier today, but it is so important. You cannot be a disciple of Christ without courage.

²³Jerry Bridges. (1988). *Trusting God: Even When Life Hurts*. Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress. (200)

²⁴ <https://www.desiringgod.org/messages/george-muellers-strategy-for-showing-god>

It takes courage to believe the truth. We need courage to face the truth about ourselves, because it is ugly. C.S. Lewis said of the first time he seriously examined himself: "I found what appalled me: a zoo of lusts, a bedlam of ambitions, a nursery of fears, a harem of fondled hatreds. My name was legion."²⁵ That's pretty horrifying, but honest. This is the human condition. We need courage to admit it and face up to it.

We need courage to trust God. And we need courage to do what Christ calls us to do; because he calls us to do hard things. It is easy to do the wrong thing, but the aftermath is much harder. It is hard to do what is right, but the results are joy and peace.

So here's my advice: to increase your happiness, do something that scares you. Practice courage in little things, and then try the next thing that scares you. Almost every day I do something that scares me, believe it or not. Mike Mason calls it "stretching." That's a less intimidating word, but I call a spade a spade. It's scary. Stretch yourself every day in something that makes you uncomfortable but that you know God would have you do.

I was a very fearful person. But as a young adult I saw how fear held me prisoner and I've worked all my life at overcoming it. People have always scared me. I didn't like making phone calls, for example. I took a job as a stock broker that required calling strangers and trying to get them to open an account with me.

I was also terrified of public speaking. I took a job that required me to speak to members of the San Jose teacher's union. This was a scary group, let me tell you! And I was terrible at it. I took Dale Carnegie and another course in public speaking. The second course involved such humiliation that I determined I would not do any more public speaking. Ever. Well, you see how that worked out! Years ago, a friend asked me to help her teach a writing class, and little by little I began conquering that fear too. Now I am a substitute teacher. *That's scary!* And now here I am speaking to you. Still scared! But less so.

I still don't like the phone. I have sometimes sat on my bed for a long time, trying to get up the nerve to call someone I didn't know well but who I knew was going through a hard time and I felt the Lord wanted me to call them. I would start to breathe harder, my heart would race. But eventually I would do it, out of obedience to Christ. A few times I have tried to be helpful in ways that turned out not to be helpful and I regretted it. But very few times. You take a risk; if it doesn't work out, it's ok. You learned something. Almost always I was glad I reached out. And every time I become a little braver.

So, to gain freedom and experience more joy: face your fears. Do what scares you. Stretch. Risk doing something loving. Reach out. Don't think that I am some great master at this. I punt a lot, missing opportunities to say something, not making that call, etc. I need to keep repenting and

²⁵C.S. Lewis. (1984). *Surprised by Joy: The Shape of My Early Life*. Orlando, FL: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich Publishers. (226)

trying again. But this is the normal Christian life. Ask God to help you do it. "I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me." (Philippians 4:13) I say that every morning before I walk in to a school.

I have been getting to know a new friend who is a neighbor. She is a believer and the dearest person who makes the biggest deal over the smallest kindness. She is also very ill and unable to go to church. There was a family event she wanted to attend and needed the strength to do it. I called her to tell her I was praying for her. But the Spirit was nudging me. Do it now! Why do we not want to pray out loud? I don't know. It feels vulnerable. Anyway, this time I obeyed. I asked if I could pray for her. It wasn't very eloquent but you know what? She cried. Maybe no one has prayed for her in a long time. Do you think I am glad I did that? You bet I am. I know how it feels when someone prays for me: it feels like love.

"Courage is fear that has said its prayers." -Dorothy Bernard. So say your prayers, and go do the thing that scares you.

Not Optional: the Necessity of Church

On to another crucial aspect of life as a believer: church. Church is where you gain those precious fellow travelers, your true family. If you want to be happy, make church the center of your life. And yet, according to surveys, as many as 40% of evangelicals don't attend church but practice their faith in "other ways," and two thirds agree with the statement, "I can walk with God without other believers."²⁶ My friends, this ought not be! This is so wrong. Church is not optional for Christians; lone ranger Christianity is anti-Christian and comes from our culture's radical individualism, not from God. It is a satanic idea to be quite blunt about it.

If church is not the center of your life, you cannot experience the full happiness of being in God's family. The church is the center of God's attention and will and plan for history itself. The kings of the earth will pass away, but not the church. Jesus came to build his church, an assembly of believers. Paul teaches us: the eye cannot say to the hand, I don't need you.²⁷ Right? We are a body, the "body of Christ." You cannot be fully Christian without being an active part of a local church. It makes no sense. Christianity promotes individuality, but it deeply opposes individualism. Christianity in that sense is positively un-American.

The repetition of church attendance forms our hearts over time. It makes us into a certain kind of person. Sermons don't have to be life-transforming or even remembered to nourish us. It's the repeated pointing us back to Christ that etches him deeper into our hearts and slowly forms his character within us.

Church is not only where we learn about God but practice what we learn. We learn how to love one another, how to serve one another, how to forgive one another and to ask forgiveness

²⁶<https://thefederalist.com/2019/08/28/two-thirds-americans-think-christians-dont-need-attend-church>

²⁷ 1Corinthians 12:21

from those we have hurt, and despite all our differences to have the joy of a common commitment to Christ.

Loneliness is epidemic in our time as families and communities have broken down and our culture has embraced radical rebellion against all constraints on our lives. David Brooks, in his book *The Second Mountain: the Quest for a Moral Life*, calls the hyper-individualism of our society “a conspiracy against joy.” “Political freedom is great,” he says. “But personal, social, and emotional freedom—when it becomes an ultimate end—absolutely sucks. It leads to a random, busy life with no discernible direction, no firm foundation, and in which, as Marx put it, all that’s solid melts to air. It turns out that freedom isn’t an ocean you want to spend your life in. Freedom is a river you want to get across so you can plant yourself on the other side—and fully commit to something.”²⁸

My friends, this is what the church is for. We are made to live in loving fellowship with one another. This soul-to-soul-connection in Christ that we experience in worship and fellowship, this binding of ourselves in love to one another and to the Lord, is the antidote to loneliness. There is nothing quite like it in the world; don’t take it for granted.

Church is not a perfect expression of this. The church is full of people who will disappoint you and sometimes hurt you, because it is full of people just like you. This includes your pastors and elders. Keep on pursuing love and forgiveness. Perfect intimacy and perfect fellowship will not come until the kingdom is fully inaugurated. Meanwhile, let the difficulties we experience in relationships teach us how to love and how to work through problems.

Church also helps protect us from drifting away. The author of Hebrews warns, “We must pay much closer attention to what we have heard, lest we drift away from it” (2:1), and tells us to “forsake not the assembling of yourselves together, as is the habit of some” (10:25). We underestimate our weakness. I am disturbed as I observe how many people, once their children are grown, stop involvement in church. This ought not be! The church needs you! Find out how you can use your experience and wisdom and gifts to bless those who are in earlier phases of life.

Younger people need church too. Young adults often become distracted by launching their lives. If you are a believer in Christ, you need to be connected with other believers. And the church needs *you*, your zeal and enthusiasm and energy and ideas.

That's what eternal life *is*: living in fellowship with God and his people forever. Jesus loves the church: shouldn't we love what Jesus loves?

Brett McCracken wrote an excellent piece about this titled, “Nothing on Your Phone Can Replace the Local Church:”

²⁸https://www.goodreads.com/author/quotes/3136576.David_Brooks?page=15

Can someone find embodied community outside a church? Of course. But most of those communities end up being... “lifestyle enclaves”—groups of like-minded people who “express their identity through shared patterns of appearance, consumption, and leisure activities.” But the church offers a deeper, more satisfying form of community because it joins people around more than the common bonds of looking similar and liking the same stuff. A church community frees you to be part of something bigger than yourself, to be around people who are not like you. It frees you from the bias-confirming bubbles of only being exposed to people who always affirm but never challenge you.²⁹

If you want to be happy, if you are a true disciple of Christ, make church the center of your life.

Most of you here are probably actively committed to church, and I commend you for that. If you aren't, please reconsider. Church involvement is not optional for a Christian.

PRAY

Prayer is an expression of our dependence on God. Prayerlessness is self-sufficiency, which is sin. Jesus said, “apart from me, you can do nothing.”³⁰ There is so much great teaching on prayer, so I won't go into detail on it today. We are told by Paul in 1 Thessalonians 5:16-17 first to rejoice always, but then to pray without ceasing. We need to consciously seek God's help in all we do.

Ask others to pray for you. When someone asks you to pray for them, do it right then and there. (As I've already admitted, this is hard for me too!)

John Piper writes: “prayer pursues God's glory by treating him as the inexhaustible reservoir of hope and help.”³¹ Prayer expresses our weakness. God's power is displayed in our weakness. We exist to glorify God and magnify his greatness. To do that: pray.

TRY JOURNALING AS A WAY TO PRAY

*It is good to give thanks to the LORD,
to sing praises to your name, O Most High;
to declare your steadfast love in the morning,
and your faithfulness at night. (Psalm 92:1-2)*

Begin each day giving thanks to the Lord for his steadfast love. Think of examples and thank him. This is a way of becoming aware of his many gifts each day and makes us happy.

I like to write these gifts down several days a week, along with written confession and petitions. Getting my worries on paper helps me to get them out of my head, and truly “cast my anxieties

²⁹<https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/nothing-phone-tgc-local-church/>

³⁰ John 15:5

³¹ (182)

on the Lord.”³² It also feeds my faith, because whenever I finish a journal I go back and reread my entries and remember what the Lord did. I also jot down answers to those written petitions. Doing this gives me joy and fills my heart with gratitude as I remember how God has been at work in my life.

I so recommend this. Believers of old kept journals. Some have become beautiful legacies, such as David Brainerd’s journal when he was a missionary to native Americans in the 18th century. But for most of us beautiful prose is not going happen. Not even full sentences! Don’t worry about that. Jot notes and just write as it comes out of you. Take fifteen minutes to do it. Journaling will slow you down so you can notice God’s many gifts to you. This will increase your joy and feed your faith as you remember what God has done for you and how he has always provided for all of your needs.

GATHERING JOY: THE CENTRALITY OF GRATITUDE

Accepting what is/embracing our lot as from God, is a pre-requisite to happiness. We all have lots of problems. We are tempted think, “If only I could solve this problem, I could be happy.” What happens when the problem is solved? More problems!

We must learn to be happy in spite of our problems. It’s one way we overcome evil with good. Our real problem is that we think that we can’t be happy as long as we have a problem. Instead of being glum with all that’s wrong, learn to celebrate all that is right. We do this by giving thanks in all things. I’m putting this last because I believe gratitude is the most powerful weapon we have for changing our perspective and making ourselves happy in God.

Mike Mason writes that giving thanks is a way of gathering joy. Who wouldn’t want to gather joy?

I read somewhere that giving thanks doubles your pleasure. First you enjoy the thing, and then when you thank God for it, you enjoy it all over again.

During the day, practice active gratitude. Puritan John Flavel wrote, “What a life of pleasure you might live by noticing the ways of providence toward you!”³³ Psalm 68:19 (King James Version) says that God daily “*loads* us with benefits.” When you notice the mountains outside your door, thank him for their steady beauty. When you step into a hot shower, thank him for the privilege and pleasure of hot water. When you clean toilets, thank the Lord that you have indoor plumbing and that you can serve your family in this way. When tragedy strikes, thank him (even through tears) that he has promised to be with you and to help you.

Doing this keeps us mindful of where our blessings come from and how very many there are all

³²1 Peter 5:7

³³Richard Rushing, ed. (2009). *Voices of the Past*. Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth Trust. (114f)

through the day, no matter how difficult our lives are.

I first discovered this secret before I was even a Christian. I was attending an Al-Anon meeting, and a girl said this: "I was putting on my socks this morning and I suddenly realized how amazing it is that I can put on my socks!" And I thought to myself, "I never saw that before! How wonderful that I can put on my socks!" That insight revolutionized my life, where I suddenly saw every little thing as a gift from God. It completely changed my life.

If we choose to be happy and thankful in spite of our problems, in large measure life can be a continual feast. Yes, we *can* expect happiness to be our default mode as Christians. Yes, we will be knocked down, sometimes severely, but we can return to joy, because whatever is happening that causes suffering, it will not have the last word. We have eternal life and look forward to the full inauguration of the Kingdom of God. Why not rejoice now, just as if we're already there?

I'm going to close with Psalm 16. In his sermon at Pentecost, Peter quotes from this very psalm as being about Christ. Since we are *in* Christ, we gain all the benefits that Christ won at the Cross. Within that psalm are hints of nearly everything I've talked about today. I hope you will read and enjoy it on your own. I pray that it will fill your heart with confidence and joy in our great glorious God, who shows us the path of life and whose presence gives us joy. To him be glory forever!

Psalm 16

*Keep me safe, my God,
for in you I take refuge.*

*I say to the LORD, "You are my Lord;
apart from you I have no good thing."
I say of the holy people who are in the land,
"They are the noble ones in whom is all my delight."
Those who run after other gods will suffer more and more.
I will not pour out libations of blood to such gods
or take up their names on my lips.*

*LORD, you alone are my portion and my cup;
you make my lot secure.
The boundary lines have fallen for me in pleasant places;
surely I have a delightful inheritance.
I will praise the LORD, who counsels me;
even at night my heart instructs me.
I keep my eyes always on the LORD.
With him at my right hand, I will not be shaken.*

*Therefore my heart is glad and my tongue rejoices;
my body also will rest secure,
because you will not abandon me to the realm of the dead,
nor will you let your holy one see decay.
You make known to me the path of life;
in your presence there is fullness of joy;
at your right hand are pleasures forevermore.*

Thank you all for being here. It's been a joy.

