

Rejoice in the Lord Always

A sermon preached by Dr. John Clayton at Covenant Presbyterian Church of Fort Smith, Arkansas on December 13, 2020.

“Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, rejoice” (Phil. 4:4).¹

The term *joy* is often misunderstood by modern Christians because of the way it is defined and used in our culture today. Joy is often considered a synonym for happiness, which in modern use is understood as more sentimental than substantive. According to *Peanuts*, Charlie Brown says, “Happiness is a pile of leaves.” Lucy says, “Happiness is walking in the grass in your bare feet.” Linus says, “Happiness is a day on the couch.” And Snoopy says, “Happiness is ice cream.”

While cute, none of these push past a sentimental perspective in our pursuit of happiness, leaving us to the fickle whims of our feelings or passively entrapped to our circumstances. Christian joy transcends our cultural understanding revealing a substantive fruit of our spiritual reality. Consider, for example, that our Lord willingly endured the cross “for the joy that was set before him” (Heb. 12:2), and yet as God’s suffering servant he was “a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief” (Isa. 53:3). Likewise, we are to “consider it nothing but joy when [we] fall into all sorts of trials” (James 1:2 NET). Christ’s suffering on the cross and our variety of trials would seemingly negate joy according to the world’s definition, but Christian joy is different.

As a Christian virtue, and indeed a gift from God, joy is neither at the mercy of our feelings nor dictated by our circumstances. Therefore, Paul could refer to himself in prison as “sorrowful, yet always rejoicing” (2 Cor. 6:10). Yet this is hardly the sentiment of many of us who are tempted to be discouraged by the trials of this life. We are tempted to grow cynical at the signs of human depravity, even growing angry when we see it so obviously displayed in ourselves. Candidly, there are days where we may wonder if we *can* rejoice.

Imprisoned for his obedience to the gospel, Paul could certainly have shared our sentiments. He could have applauded our “authenticity.” He could have acquiesced to a dour view of the Christian life. But he didn’t. Instead, he commands, “Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, rejoice.” It is not merely a statement of fact but a command to rejoice...always, which is an impossibility if joy is sentimental or circumstantial. The pragmatist will ask, who in the world can *always* rejoice? And yet, such is the command: rejoice always! Or is it? A command to rejoice always is indeed an impossibility but for one little prepositional phrase: “in the Lord.” The source of Christian joy is not you, or me, or our circumstances. The source of Christian joy is the Lord.

The Source of Joy

In considering that the Lord is the source of our joy, it is important for us to understand who God is and how he works for our joy. For example, our God is “a Spirit, infinite, eternal, and unchangeable, in his being, wisdom, power, holiness, justice, goodness, and truth” (WSC Q. 4). In contrast, we are created, finite beings, limited to space and time. We grow and age and change. God does not. Therefore, to rejoice in the Lord is to rejoice in the One who is not

¹ Unless referenced otherwise, all Scripture quotations are from *The Holy Bible, English Standard Version* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2001).

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constrained to his creation, in One who has no beginning and end, in One who is the same yesterday, today, and tomorrow (Heb. 13:8). Our fickle feelings may fluctuate, and our situational circumstances may shift, but our Lord, in whom we rejoice, does not.

However, despite the difference between God and those created in his image, he is not distant from us. By God's grace we are chosen and called, through faith in Christ we are justified and adopted, and the guarantee of this is the indwelling presence of the Spirit of God (Rom. 8:9). The presence of the Holy Spirit is a defining characteristic of the Christian life. There are no exceptions, and because there are no exceptions, we rejoice in the Lord always because the Lord is always with us.

If then the Lord is the source of our joy by his indwelling presence, how is the joy of the Lord revealed in us? Consider the metaphor of fruit. As one of the fruits of the Holy Spirit is joy, so it grows like fruit from its source. That is, through the indwelling presence of the Spirit godly attributes are produced and developed in the life of the Christian. As Jesus said, "Abide in me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit by itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in me" (John 15:4). So, the spiritual fruit of joy is telling of its divine source, and also fulfilling; as we bear the fruit of joy, we are blessed by God and are a blessing to others. We could say then that in bearing the fruit of joy we reveal our ultimate satisfaction in the source of our joy.

The Satisfaction of Joy

The answer to the first question of the Westminster Shorter Catechism states, "Man's chief end is to glorify God, and to enjoy him forever." The first clause of this answer is the one we typically emphasize, and rightly so. God's glory is primary. The second clause, however, we may emphasize and recite, but do we really believe it? Perhaps we don't fully understand it, or can't comprehend it, or maybe we find it too good to be true. Were we really created to enjoy God? Have we in Christ been redeemed for everlasting enjoyment of him? And if so, how do we enjoy God?

Thankfully, the Westminster divines did not leave us without direction. In the very next question of the catechism, they explain that "the only rule to direct us how we may glorify and enjoy [God]" is the Word of God. We don't look to ourselves or others. If we want to know clearly, through the enabling work of the Holy Spirit, how we may rejoice in the Lord always, we go to the Word of God. It is in fact the only rule, or standard, to direct us. As our only standard, God's Word has much to say about our joy, and while time does not permit, there are several practical points I want to draw to your attention (I've organized them into four words to help us remember: *contemplate, cultivate, continue, and communion*).

First, to rejoice in the Lord always, let us *contemplate* the magnitude of our salvation. Christian, consider these facts: "you were dead in the trespasses and sins in which you once walked"; you were "following the course of this world," led by "the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience"; and you were just like them, among them, living "in the passions of our flesh, carrying out the desires of the body and the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind" (Eph. 2:1-3).

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Now, contemplate this: “But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved—and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, so that in the coming ages he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus” (Eph. 2:4-7). Think on that, let it sink in, and don’t ever get over it! The Prophet Habakkuk confesses, “I will rejoice in the LORD; I will take joy in the God of my salvation” (Hab. 3:18). There is a direct connection between our joy in the Lord and rejoicing in our salvation. Christian, “Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, rejoice.”

Second, to rejoice in the Lord always, let us *cultivate* a love for God’s Word. The psalmist reveals the connection cultivating a love for God’s Word and rejoicing in the Lord when he sings, “In the way of your testimonies I delight as much as in all riches” (Ps. 119:14); and, “I find my delight in your commandments, which I love” (Ps. 119:47); and, “How sweet are your words to my taste, sweeter than honey to my mouth!” (Ps. 119:113). It is in the *intentional determination* of cultivating this love that we find not a burden but joy. As Matthew Henry put it, “If good men have not a continual feast, it is their own fault.”² Let us come to the table of God’s Word and feast: read the Word, sing it, meditate upon it, and be under the preaching of it, and in doing so “Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, rejoice.”

Third, to rejoice in the Lord always, let us *continue* to obey the Lord. Christian obedience is not an option but a necessity for Christian joy. As John Piper describes it in his book, *When I Don't Desire God: How to Fight for Joy*, obedience is a fight for joy, while sin destroys joy. Have you ever thought of it that way? Obedience is a fight for joy, while sin destroys joy. For this reason, in what may be considered a psalm of repentance, David prays, “Let me again experience the joy of your deliverance. Sustain me by giving me the desire to obey” (Ps. 51:12 NET). It is in obeying the Lord that we may “Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, rejoice.”

Fourth, to rejoice in the Lord always, enjoy *communion* in the church. Communion can of course mean celebrating the Lord’s Supper, but I mean something inclusive of but broader than the sacrament. As it is translated from the Greek word *koinonia*, the word also means “fellowship.” God uses the communion or fellowship in the church to “encourage . . . and build one another up” (1 Thess. 5:11). Have you considered that rejoicing in the Lord always can be a collective blessing, as your brothers and sisters see the witness of the Holy Spirit’s presence despite your circumstances? The world wants you to believe that joy is individualistic, but in the church it is congregational. And in the communion of the church, God gives us his ordinary means of grace (his Word, sacraments, and prayer) that we enjoy together. Therefore, enjoying communion in the church, let us “Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, rejoice.”

Again, this is not an exhaustive list. I trust that you will go to God’s Word and find more, but as we contemplate on the magnitude of our salvation, cultivate a love for God’s Word, continue in obedience to the Lord, and enjoy communion in the church, we are encouraged to rejoice in the Lord always. Or, borrowing from the Westminster Shorter Catechism, John Piper writes, “God is

² Matthew Henry, *Commentary on the Whole Bible: Genesis to Revelation*, ed. Leslie F. Church (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1960), 1867.

most glorified in us when we are most satisfied in him.”³ God’s glory and our enjoyment are not mutually exclusive but inclusive.

The Sustainability of Joy

If God is the source of our joy and ultimately the satisfaction of our joy, then what are we to make of the adverb “always.” Is it possible to rejoice in the Lord always? On this side of glory? No. Just as sinless perfection is impossible, rejoicing always is too. And yet, just as we are called to be holy as God is holy (1 Peter 1:16), we are commanded to rejoice in the Lord always. This doesn’t make Christian joy any less valuable but certainly to be treasured. Just as our justified righteousness cannot be robbed or our adoption nullified, so our joy in the Lord rests on who God is and what he has done for us in Christ. As Calvin put it, “that joy that is settled in God is one that is never taken away from us.”⁴

Therefore, that we do not rejoice in the Lord *always*, as we should, reminds of the present reality of this “body of death” (Rom. 7:24), but it also reminds us the eternal joy that awaits us. Our fight for joy in the Lord today also reminds us that there will be a time and place when and where we will rejoice in the Lord always and forever. I think this translation of Peter Abelard’s 12th Century poem captures this concept brilliantly:

O what their joy and their glory must be,
Those endless Sabbaths the blessed ones see;
Crown for the valiant, to weary ones, rest;
God shall be all, and in all ever blessed.

There, where no troubles distraction can bring,
We the sweet anthems of Zion shall sing;
While for Thy grace, Lord, their voices of praise
Thy blessed people eternally raise.

Now, in the meanwhile, with hearts raised on high,
We for that country must yearn and must sigh;
Seeking Jerusalem, dear native land,
Through our long exile on Babylon’s strand.

Low before Him with our praises we fall,
Of Whom, and in Whom, and through Whom are all;
Of Whom, the Father; and in Whom, the Son,
Through Whom, the Spirit, with Them ever One.⁵

³ John Piper, “God Is Most Glorified in Us When We Are Most Satisfied in Him,” *Desiring God*, October 13, 2012, <https://www.desiringgod.org/messages/god-is-most-glorified-in-us-when-we-are-most-satisfied-in-him>.

⁴ John Calvin, *The Epistles of Paul the Apostle to the Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians and Colossians*, trans. T.H.L. Parker (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1965), 288.

⁵ Peter Abelard, *O What Their Joy and Their Glory Must Be*, <https://www.blueletterbible.org/hymns/o/O-What-Their-Joy-And-Their-Glory-Must-Be.cfm>.