

The Letter to the Philippians

Lesson 4: Ten Things That Rob Believers of Joy

#1) False Salvation – The Parable of the weeds (Matt. 13:24-30, 36-43) teaches us that in this world, as well as in the church, there will be those who are legitimately saved, and those who are not. There will be those good seeds who are planted by the Son of Man, and there will be bad seeds sowed by the devil. It's not that there are the saved, and the intentional imposters, sadly, there are the saved, and those who are duped into believing that they are. We can almost see the shock on the faces of these people as they stand before their Judge in Matthew 7:21-23. There are those people who will live their entire lives believing themselves to be a follower of Christ, when they aren't. There are those people who place a shallow faith into a Saviour who doesn't exist. They believe in a Jesus, but he doesn't look a thing like the Jesus of the Bible. They sit Sunday after Sunday listening to the biblical exposition of Scripture, and yet their lives show no fruit, no impact from it. This is what Jesus spoke of in Matthew 7:26-27.

What we do as Christians matters just as much as what we believe as Christians. Theology matters, and despite what some may say, our practice matters too. Protestants have run so far from the works-righteous doctrines of Roman Catholicism, that we have ended up in the damning error of thinking that salvation by grace alone means that works are now irrelevant. James had something to say about the importance of works in James 2:14-26.

There is an inter-connectedness between believing the right things theologically, and then living out those beliefs. And one of the fruits of holding the two together is joy. It's the fruit on the list between love and peace if you're keeping score. (Gal 5:22) Our joy in Christ was never designed to end at reaching a certain level of knowledge. There are those who think so, and live their entire lives with a cold knowledge of the Bible. We know from the Bible that God has a purpose for our knowledge, that many fruits are intended to come from it, fruits that cannot come without it. Let us heed this first warning, and pray that God would help us as we continue to find our joy in Him alone.

#2) The influence of Satan and his demons – I've discovered that there are 3 categories of Christians when it comes to what we believe about Satan: Those who spend way too much time looking for him, talking about him, casting him out, fearing him, and so on. Those who spend no time at all thinking about him, treating him as a myth, a legend, a fairy tale. And, those who get it right. There is a right and proper way to think about Satan, as well as a prescribed way to live in light of his presence. Peter believed in Satan, and he warns us about Satan's effort towards believers in 1 Peter 5:8. I will resist at this point the urge to expand this point covering the characteristics of Satan, his given power and limitation. The purpose of this point on the list is to make believers aware that there is a real devil, whose purpose is to destroy. Can Satan really destroy our salvation? Jesus said that no one can remove our salvation. John 10:28-30. Paul said it too. Romans 8:33-39. So if Satan has no power to destroy what God has built, than what is 1 Peter 5:8 referring to? It's referring to joy! If he can't kill it, then he'll slow it down. So long as Satan can have most Christians walking around confused, depressed, nervous and bitter, the

gospel will stay quiet and hidden. What could be a more confusing testimony to a watching world to show them that Christ isn't the answer, than watching a group of believers robbed of joy, trying to convince unbelievers to believe in the greatest news they've ever heard.

#3) An inadequate understanding of God's sovereignty – “And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose.” I shouldn't have to cite that verse. Most of you probably finished the sentence in your heads after the first six words. And the reason why is because of the consistent biblical teaching that you get from this church. We teach with a primary view on the sovereignty of God, because the Bible is written that way. God's sovereignty is critical when understanding the flow of history with biblical eschatology, and the upholding of the universe, and the security of the salvation of believers, and prayer. I don't understand why any Christian would ever want to deny such a doctrine of the sovereignty of God, yet the vast majority of western Christians angrily deny it.

It will severely rob the Christian of joy to inadequately understand, or altogether reject the sovereignty of God. If God is all-present (Omnipresent), and all-knowing (Omniscient), and all-powerful (meaning no one is stronger, not even all of creation put together – Omnipotent), and all-wise (Omnisapient), and He is [and no Christian would deny any of those attributes], than nothing can happen outside of His will.

If God is all of those things, and He is, than He is sovereign. When John pens the future on the Isle of Patmos (Revelation), he isn't writing what he hopes will happen, he isn't writing what God hopes will happen, he is writing what God told him WILL happen. But how could God specifically and intricately describe the future unless He was actively involved in bringing it to fruition. So it brings joy to the Christian to know that God is in control of our world, and it would only bring fear and worry to a believer if God were as helpless in the advances this world makes as we are.

What about prayer? Although there are many Christians who affirm the attributes above, they still deny the sovereignty of God. They don't do so mathematically, but rather philosophically. In my mind, I can take the four attributes of God and conclude sovereignty mathematically, $1+1+1+1=4$. But for many others, they can look at the same math problem and conclude, $1+1+1+1=yeah$, but if God is really sovereign, then that means...(insert errant unbiblical philosophy here).

What does this have to do with prayer Ken? Good question. My point is to say, that even though many Christians deny God's sovereignty, based upon philosophy, NO Christian denies God's sovereignty when they pray. Think about it. When you pray to God on behalf of another Christian, or even for a non-believer, you are praying to the only One who has the power and ability to help! All believers come to God recognizing His power and control, if they didn't, what would be the point of praying? So, just the same as when we consider the flow of world history, alongside the plan and purpose of God, when we pray, our joy is made complete when we rest in God's sovereignty, and our joy is diminished, and sometimes extinguished, when we pray to a God who means well, but whose hands are tied. We will unpack this element of prayer more in the next point.

One last element of God's sovereignty that I want to focus on before we move on through our list, is the joy that is given to a believer when we recognize God's sovereign plan in our redemption, our security in God's plan, and our protection against all opposition. There is definitely a missing element of joy in a believer who walks nervously in limbo, never certain of the salvation that Christ promises to them.

John 10:28-29. Believe every word of it. How does a believer receive eternal life? “I [Jesus] give them eternal life.” That's the point. We receive eternal life. We don't earn it. We don't find it. It's given to us by God. And how does that bring us joy? Because our God is Omnipotent remember! “My Father,

who has given them to me, is greater than all!” What does that mean for us? It means that “no one is able to snatch [us] out of the Father’s hand.” Our salvation is all of God. He starts it, He sustains it, and He finishes it. Romans 8:29-30. Paul said it in Philippians 1:6.

If God is the One who is initiating, gifting, sustaining, perfecting, and glorifying our salvation, if He is the great Sovereign through it all, than our trust in Him makes our joy complete! Quite the opposite, if God is a well-meaning old soul, sitting on a mountain top with His fingers crossed, hoping that we’ll find Him, than our joy is only as fleeting as our most dedicated moment of faith. If our faith is hinged upon our decision, than our salvation has no security, because our performance may prove to be a failure.

The Christian is not supposed to live in fear of losing his or her salvation, the scriptures were written that we place of faith in the finished work of Jesus Christ. We are not to be a worrying people, we are to remember that our God cares for us and wants the best for us, and He will see to it that our needs are met. Matthew 6:25-34. There is a certainty in our salvation that Christ wants us to have and cherish. Listen to the words of John 14:1-3, and let them apply to you. Someday we WILL be with Him, because our God is faithful, and He has promised to finish what He has begun in us.

God’s sovereignty means all of these things to a Christian. To be honest, I don’t know how a Christian can deny the sovereignty of God and find joy in anything. But the sovereignty of God means so much more than a three items we’ve covered in this third point. There are good resources that I can point you towards if you’d like to learn more about this doctrine, and the many implications of it. For now, let’s let John MacArthur close this point with a summary statement,

“God’s sovereignty is the over-arching and all-encompassing reality that keeps everything in perspective. It is because of His divine sovereignty that, with utter confidence, believers can “cast [their] burden upon the Lord and [know that] He will sustain [them, because] He will never allow the righteous to be shaken. (Psalm 55:22)”²¹

#4) Prayerlessness – It should go without saying that any relationship devoid of communication is a bad relationship on the road to destruction. It should also be common sense to understand that there are rules, and limitations to communication that make it effective, appropriate, and useful. While communicating with my daughter is appropriate, discussing the stock market with her wouldn’t be helpful, nor would it promote unity between us. We all know intrinsically that there is an appointed time to have appropriate conversations with appropriate people, why would the rules change with our communion with God?

Yet so many speak to God, and have expectations of God, that are entirely inappropriate and unbiblical. Many treat God as though He were a cosmic vending machine, who dispenses the very thing they’re looking for, so long as they put the sufficient amount of obedience (coins) into lives. This type of thinking is backwards at best. God becomes the genie in the bottle, the one who grants our wishes. Obedience becomes the currency used to twist the arm of the Omnipotent, rather than being an act of loving gratitude.

So what does praying, or prayerlessness have to do with having, or not having joy as a Christian?

I believe the answer lies in the prescribed method of praying that God gives to us. There is a right way to pray, and a wrong way to pray. God’s not so much concerned that you pray, but that you pray as you ought too. It would be the same as if I were to say that I didn’t care how disrespectful my son spoke to me, I was just happy that we were speaking at all. Or, that I didn’t care how much my son expressed

²¹ MacArthur, John, *New Testament Commentary: Philippians* Moody, 2001 (p. 33)

greed, and selfishness, and anger in his words and tone when we spoke, because I was so over-joyed that we were speaking at all.

Parents care very much how their children think and speak, and that care is magnified infinitely when we speak of our Heavenly Father. Our Father cares greatly how we think, and approach Him, and that is precisely what prayer seeks to accomplish. Prayer is not a vehicle that God has given us, so that we can manipulate Him, and bend His will towards ours. Quite the contrary, prayer is a vehicle that God given us, whereby our will can align with His will (found in His Word), so that our desires align with His desires, and our requests and petitions match His.

This is important to remember, because as those who are part of the created order, we as image bearers of the Creator Himself, we must recognize that Father knows best. There is a way for a man to find joy in God, and that being through prayer! So many when confronted with the gospel think of God as a cosmic kill-joy (as I once heard MacArthur say). So many people think that if they ever aligned their entire lives with the will of God, they'd lose all the joy of life. What could be further from the truth? Our God has designed us to find our utmost joy and satisfaction in Him, and that cannot be done apart from the alignment of our lives to His prescribed will, and that process cannot be done apart from a life of prescribed prayer.

W. Bingham Hunter says concerning the relationship between obedience (which only comes from a prior knowledge of scripture) and prayer, "Our obedience pleases God and creates in us an environment of love [and joy] in which the Spirit encourages growth in our fellowship with, and understanding of, the Lord Jesus and his Father. As we come to know them better, we begin to see the world through God's eyes. As we learn to see existence God's way, we are enabled to pray according to His will."²²

#5) The emotional low that frequently follows a spiritual high – There is a spectrum across our cultural version of Christianity today. There are thinkers on the far right, and feelers on the far left. Biblical Christianity falls in the middle. The thinkers look down on the feelers because all they do is laugh and dance in the rain with Lord, but who also aren't quite sure where to find anything in the Bible. The feelers look down on the thinkers because all the thinkers care about is theology. The feeling know that the thinkers can recite Romans in the original language at 3am, but they have no concerns for evangelism. The thinkers mock the holy-rollers, and the feelers mock the frozen-chosen.

Here's the point. You **MUST** think, and you **MUST** feel. **BUT**, there are times when you can do both inappropriately. There are times when are thinking is misplaced, and times when our feelings are too. One comes before the other, if your thinking is right, your feeling will become right too.

Application: If our thinking is such, that "I have decided to follow Jesus...no turning back, no turning back." Then I become the hinge upon which my salvation turns. I came to Christ, I invited Him into my heart. I have repented and placed my faith in Him. I have changed my life. (Insert emotional high here) And then a few years pass... I've grown stale in my faith, I've left my first love. Suddenly my performance is weak, now I'm not sure about God's feeling towards me. Am I really a Christian? Did I lose my salvation? Can I earn it back? (Insert emotional low here)

If our joy in Christ is based upon our performance, our decision, than our joy will be as turbulent as the ocean during a hurricane. We are weak, and feeble. Our hearts are deceitfully wicked, who can know

²² Hunter, W. Bingham, *The God Who Hears* Inter Varsity Press, 1986 (p. 102)

them? (Jer. 17:9) You can't trust yourself. You're not strong enough, smart enough, wise enough, or good enough to please God and secure eternal life with Him forever.

But if our hope is fixed on Christ alone, our joy is resting on solid ground. He is the God who has written our names in the Book of Life before the foundation of the world, He is the One who called us at the appointed time, He is the One who lived, and died, and rose again for the redemption of our souls. He is the One who puts His Spirit in our hearts, and He is One who promises to take us one day to be where He is forever.

Those truths, when meditated upon daily, radically change the joy we experience in our daily lives. Do emotional highs come and go? Of course. But when a child of God recognizes that their loving Father is holding them tightly in His hand, even when they may feel alone, they aren't. No matter how unfaithful we are, we can rest assured that our Father remains faithful, and desires only the best for us.

#6) Focusing on circumstances - "Man's nature, so to speak, is a perpetual factory of idols," said John Calvin. We manufacture wicked desires in our heart at such a rate, that all the resources in the world together could not appease them. It really doesn't matter who you are, or where you are in life. There will always be someone who is taller, thinner, smarter, richer, healthier, stronger, and so forth.

There's really only two approaches that we can take in regards to our present circumstances: Thankfulness, and bitterness. A thankful approach recognizes who we are before God (depraved, unworthy sinner saved by grace), and what we deserve (an eternal punishment for our sins), and is then thankful for our present circumstances, knowing that it is far better than what we deserve. The bitter approach stems purely from pride. It begins from an ungodly, and unrealistic definition of who we are (a good person who deserves far greater than what we have) and it craves all of the idols of what we feel we have earned.

It is a good lesson for a Christian to learn that you will never satisfy your hearts' desire. A good example of this is John D. Rockefeller, Sr. He was an American industrialist and philanthropist who played a pivotal role in the establishment of the oil industry and defined the structure of modern philanthropy. (In case the name triggered a memory for you, Rockefeller plaza in NYC is named after his son) Rockefeller Sr. believed that his purpose in life was to make as much money as possible. I'll spare you the details of how he made his fortunes, but the point is that when he died in 1937, he was worth an estimated \$1.4 billion dollars. In today's world, Bill Gates hasn't even come close to him. Rockefeller Sr. is figured to be one of the richest men this world has ever known. Near the end of his life, he was asked in an interview, "How much money is enough money?" He replied, "Just a little bit more."

So, if you feel like as though you'd be satisfied if you only got _____, you wouldn't. (*insert idol here*) is not where the Lord intended for you to find joy. In fact, (*insert idol here*) is nothing more than a carrot in front of your nose, which makes you the mule behind it chasing away. Read the words of Christ in [John 14:27](#). Christ has given us peace. He has removed the carrot, and shown it to be nothing more than a two cent vegetable. He is the One that we should fix our eyes upon and follow, He is the only One worthy of our adoration. We will find our only and lasting joy in Him. Let's finish this point by reading Paul's words in [Philippians 4:11-12](#).

#7) Ingratitude – We have talked about this in part in our previous points, but here is a more formal, and brief word. We should never forget that being thankful is not a reaction, or even a wise choice, but a command. A command? Yes, a command. And it's commanded for a reason, and the reason is because we wouldn't, if we didn't focus our minds to be thankful. Here is one command to be thankful, [1 Thessalonians 5:18](#). It is a sobering thought to know that unthankful sinners will be eternally punished by

God. (Romans 1:18-21) A believer will have a hard time being joyful in the Lord, when their thoughts are largely focused, not on what they do have in Christ, but what they desire outside of Him.

#8) Forgetfulness – As people who are always looking for an excuse as to why we’ve fallen short, “I forgot” seems to work well. We blame our age, and our busy lives, and our distractions, in an effort to make forgetting very natural and innocent. But there is one problem, those aren’t scriptural reasons, because we’re commanded to remember. There is nothing innocent about a ‘mature believer’ who behaves like a new convert in front of new converts, because they’ve ‘forgotten’ the wonderful, life-changing truths of scripture. There is nothing innocent about a body of believers being stunted in spiritual growth because of a ‘forgetful’ ‘mature’ body of believers.

There will be a great lack of joy, if you are a person who has been indoctrinated heavily with the Word of God, and yet live as an unbeliever. There will be no lasting joy in your life, and I believe that to be a gift from God, calling you to repentance. I get that from the warning from Christ in Revelation 2:4-5.

#9) Uncontrolled feelings (living by the flesh instead of by the Spirit) – Let’s let Lloyd-Jones open this point,

“I suggest that the main trouble in this whole matter of spiritual depression is this, that we allow our self to talk to us instead of talking to our self...Have you ever realized that most of your unhappiness in life is due to the fact that you are listening to yourself rather than talking to yourself?...The main art in the matter of spiritual living is to know how to handle yourself.”²³

The problem with our world today is that we’re encouraged to dig deep and find our inner strength. Our society teaches the superiority of self-confidence, self-esteem, and self-worth. “It doesn’t matter what they think, be comfortable in you” is the motto. And to a point I can agree with that, sometimes what people think is brutal, and hurtful, and shouldn’t be listened too. But carried through to its end, that motto leads to ruin. Sometimes, even though it may damage our ego, it does matter what people think of you, because sometimes what they see is a danger in your life, and you shouldn’t be so quick to ignore them.

But having a teachable spirit, and being a humble servant is laughably looked upon today. Placing your entire life under the authority of another is ridiculed, viewed as insane, or incredibly weak-minded to say the least. We live in a world that says, “Do what’s right for you! There is no truth!” Our society tells us to follow our hearts, and to ignore any voices who would detract from our personal happiness. “We just don’t need that kind of negativity in our lives.”

So Lloyd-Jones says that we need to stop allowing our self to talk to us. And what he means by that is, that our self is not the all-wise, all-knowing, all-powerful Creator, the Sovereign of the universe. Our self is actually young (regardless of your age), and stupid (compared to God). In perspective to God, listening to your heart makes about as much sense as taking stock advice from a toddler. Your self is not worthy of an ear, your self needs to be strapped into a school chair and taught. That’s why Lloyd-Jones says we must talk to our self. And what does he mean by that? Clearly, he intends that we take what is authoritative (the Word of God), and let that be the loudest and biggest voice in the room, so loud that even our whispers are drowned out.

So, if you’re a Christian by profession, but not practice, you shouldn’t expect to be joyful. Our joy is found in the light of Christ. Living by our uncontrolled feelings of the flesh can and will only lead into utter darkness. The utter pit of joylessness.

²³ Lloyd-Jones, Martyn, *Spiritual Depression* Eerdmans, 1965 (p. 20-21)

One more.

#10) Unwillingness to accept forgiveness – There's way in which can see a Christian struggle with God's forgiveness of them, and applaud their humility. It almost seems to show their deep understanding of their sinfulness, to understand how much they don't deserve forgiveness. But not only is that type of thinking wrong, it also robs the Christian of the joy and comfort that God intended they have.

In Matthew 6:14-15, Jesus uses certain language, God *will* also forgive them. Even Psalms 103:12, David says that our sins are eternally removed from us. And John tells us, that based upon the faithfulness and righteousness of God, we are cleansed. 1 John 1:9

How many times does the Bible have to say something before it's true? Only once. How many times does it have to say something before we believe it is quite another story. It's critically important that we understand that God desires that we experience our forgiveness even today. There is a rejoicing in our forgiveness! J.D. Greear wrote an entire book, "Stop asking Jesus into your heart!" to encourage the joyless Christian to find their joy in what Christ has done, rather than walk in depression over the topic of forgiveness.

God wants us to look forward to a day when we are rid of sin, but He also intends us to live today under the light of His grace and mercy. Our forgiveness is sure and true! But not only do we find joy in forgiveness, God also finds joy when we repent and turn from our sin to Him. That's what Luke 15:7 is talking about. God delights when we walk in the light of His grace. Proverbs 11:20, 15:8.

So, ten lines of evidence later, we must conclude that the Christian, individually and corporately, is intended to be joy-filled. But as we have seen, the Christian finds their joy in Christ alone. Everyone is out to find joy. The unbeliever is chasing it in everything. This dark world is lying to its inhabitants by promising joy and satisfaction, meaning and purpose in all the things that the world chases after. The Christian knows better, or at least they should. The Christian knows the purpose of the human heart. Because God made our hearts to find joy in Him, trying to find joy elsewhere is like trying to cram a square peg into a round hole.

The Romans 1 world may look happy. But looking at the numbers: divorce is widespread, families are train wrecks, substance abuse is abundant. This doesn't look like a happy world at all, it actually looks more than a world where God has "given them up in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, to the dishonoring of their bodies among themselves." (Romans 1:24)

So, fight for your joy. There is a spiritual war going on all around you. Put on the armor of God. Fight the good fight of the faith. Cling to Christ alone, and He will sustain you. May all of us here be found one day in His presence, hearing, "Well done, my good and faithful servant."

And now, let's get back to our study of Philippians.