There is a popular song that many kids learn when they are growing up in church that speaks of joy. I won’t sing it for you. If you’re one of those people who likes to be scared Halloween is just a few days away.

The lyrics go: I’ve got the joy, joy, joy, joy, down in my heart

Apparently, this guy misheard the lyrics. (picture of joy down in my cart)

Here’s the thing: that picture is pretty silly, but I would venture to guess that it’s a whole lot closer to the way a lot of Christians view joy, and the rest of the fruit of the Spirit, than we would care to admit.

Is the fruit of the Spirit something that God is really doing in our hearts? Is it changing who we are and how we live? Or is the fruit of the Spirit just one more thing that we try to acquire like dropping something into our cart at Walmart? None of us would likely suggest that the fruit of the Spirit is something we don’t want, but how does that play out in how we live? Do we really want our lives to change to look like the things Paul mentions in Galatians 5?

**Galatians 5:22–23 ESV — 22** But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, **23** gentleness, self-control; against such things there is no law.

There seems to be a lot of misunderstanding about what exactly joy is. Part of that is because of the overlapping uses of the word joy. We use the word joy in several different ways. One is to describe a state of experiencing joy itself. You may say that doing something like spending time with your children or grandchildren or a certain hobby gives you joy. We also use it to talk about the source of our joy. We say things like my children are the joy of my life. We can also use it as a description of expressing joy. You jumped for joy when you heard good news.

The Greek language has several words for joy, but the most common is χαρά (chara) which means the experience of gladness. What’s interesting is that we find all those uses of joy in the Bible. Biblical authors use the words for joy to talk about the state of joy, the source of joy, and the expression of joy. They used that word pretty much exactly like we do today.

In Matt 2 we read about the Magi being overwhelmed with joy, John rejoices greatly when he hears Jesus’ voice, and Paul continually encourages the Philippians to express their joy.

But even so, we are left with the question of what exactly joy is. What is it that we are trying to convey when we use the word joy? We usually talk about joy when we have been satisfied with something, our sense of wellbeing, our underlying contentment because we have experienced something or someone in particular. The object or source of our joy can vary. The depth and intensity of our joy vary along with the source.

To see joy a little more clearly, it might be helpful to compare it to happiness or enjoyment. Joy and happiness both involve getting enjoyment from something or someone. But the things that bring us happiness vary greatly. The nature of our happiness depends totally on the object or source of our enjoyment.

We can enjoy a good meal, and that brings us happiness or satisfaction. We can enjoy a meal that a good friend has prepared for us, we’ll probably find more enjoyment in that. But the food we eat will pale in comparison to spending time with that friend, having a genuine conversation with them. The enjoyment we get out of that will last far longer than the temporary happiness of a full stomach.

Here’s where we see happiness and joy begin to differ. Happiness, enjoyment, satisfaction is typically focused on us and what we experience. Joy is focused away from us. Joy is not just inward. It has a cause that is outwardly focused, so it is also something we share with others.[[1]](#footnote-1) One of the characteristics of true love is that it is focused away from us, on others, not on ourselves. Joy is the same way.

The character of happiness or enjoyment becomes closer to that of joy the more outwardly focused it becomes. So, the enjoyment we get from genuine conversation with our friend is much closer to joy than the temporary happiness we get from a full stomach.

Stasi Eldredge says in her book *Defiant Joy*, “Joy is different from happiness. Both are great. But joy seems higher…better somehow, rooted in more reliable things…Happiness is unpredictable; it feels vulnerable because it is tied to my circumstances…Joy is something else altogether. It feels firmer, richer, less vulnerable somehow. Joy is not happiness on steroids. It is not happiness squared. Every healthy human being has the capacity to feel happiness, but joy is something entirely different, made up of its own unique substance... Joy is connected to God and reserved for those who are tapping into his reservoir, who are connected to his life.

Joy is rooted in God and his kingdom, in the surety of his goodness, his love for us. It is immovable. Unshakable. Joy is available at all times, day and night, because God and his kingdom are always available to us.”

See joy has an entirely different cause than the kind of happiness or enjoyment we get from something that happens to us. Part of what makes joy and happiness so different is that happiness is a conditional experience. We experience happiness and enjoyment for a short time. Only while things are good for us, while we feel good.

Our world tends to lump joy and happiness together. That turns joy into a circumstantial thing, based on how each individual day goes. Our world believes that experiencing joy and happiness can only be done in the absence of affliction and sorrow. That’s how joy and happiness are usually defined: the absence of something undesirable, such as pain, suffering, or disappointment. If those things are not currently in our lives, we declare ourselves happy and go along our way.

Happiness and enjoyment are tied to our circumstances. We all know that sometimes we have bad days. Sometimes that big client you’ve been working so hard for decides to go with another firm. Sometimes you have an unexpected fender bender. Sometimes you have the unexpected expense of a major appliance that suddenly stopped working. Sometimes you have conflicts with your spouse that take a lot longer to resolve than you would like.

If those things make you happy, then something is wrong. It’s okay not to be happy about something. It’s okay to recognize that there are things out there that make us angry, frustrated, sad. There are even things we grieve over. Happiness is hard to find in those times. Joy is not.

That is one of the greatest differences, one of the most distinct things about Christian joy versus the joy of the world. Our joy is not circumstantial, the world’s joy is.

As Christians, we are not called to try to escape the pain and suffering in this world. The Christian joy that Paul is talking about is not about how we feel when something is absent. It is our response to something that is present and desirable: God.

Happiness is about how we feel at any given moment. Joy is not. Joy is not a feeling. It’s a response to God’s presence in our lives. It is a response to God’s redeeming work in our lives.

In *The Confessions of St. Augustine*, he said, “You have created us for yourself, and our hearts are restless until they rest in you”. Later in the same book he said, “Oh Lord, far be it from me to think that whatever joy I feel makes me truly happy. For there is a joy that is not given to those who do not love you, but only to those who love you for your own sake. You yourself are their joy. Happiness is to rejoice in you and for you and because of you. This is true happiness and there is no other. Those who think there is another kind of happiness look for joy elsewhere, but theirs is not true joy”.

Because God is the source and object of joy for a Christian, our joy is not based on circumstances. It doesn’t go away when hardships come. When sickness strikes, when jobs are lost, when bank accounts dip below zero, when loved ones die, or even if we face death ourselves.

Stasi Eldredge talked about what it meant to have joy while dealing with great loss. She said, “Joy says, ‘Even so, I have a reason to celebrate.” Sounds like God. A God who laughs at the sneers of the enemy, stares suffering in the face, and proclaims with fierce love, “You do not have the final word.” As he does, He captures our hearts with a hope that defies death.

In the midst of all the suffering in the world, it can feel irresponsible, even frivolous, to have joy. And yet, and still, we are called to it. Certainly there is a time to grieve. There is a time to mourn. To wail. To sigh. There is a time to know our loss…, but that doesn’t mean we can’t have joy even in that painful knowing.

Joy is the heartbeat of the kingdom of God. Joy is what sustains us; it is our strength. We can be resilient. We can be filled with the expectations of good things. And we can have joy in the midst of the lamentations of our lives.”

Several weeks ago we talked about the unshakable hope that we have in the promise of Jesus. Our hope in the promise of eternal life with Jesus is the foundation of our joy. The reason we have the ability to look past the sorrows and hardships of life is because of the hope we have in Jesus. That is where we find our joy.

We see many examples of people in Scripture that go through hardships and sorrows and yet somehow retain their joy. Jesus tells his disciples in his farewell discourse in ­John 16 that they will go through suffering and pain after he is gone, just like a woman going through childbirth. But just like a childbirth, the pain endured will be replaced by a joy that cannot be broken.

In Acts 16, after Paul and Silas are flogged and thrown into prison in Philippi, they pray and sing hymns to God. Paul praises the Thessalonians for their joy throughout persecution in 1 Thessalonians 1. Paul is a great example of this as well in Philippians when he is about to be put on trial, possibly executed, and yet he says over and over again that he has joy even through his suffering.

Jesus is our greatest example of this.

**Hebrews 12:1–2 ESV — 1** … let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, **2** looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God.

Jesus didn’t find his joy in the suffering of the cross. He found his joy in what came after. The joy set before Jesus was what Paul talks about in Philippians 2.

Because Jesus humbled himself and was obedient even to the point of enduring the cross Paul says: **Philippians 2:9–11 ESV — 9** Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name, **10** so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, **11** and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

Having joy despite our suffering and hardships does not mean that we should ignore or deny our suffering. The suffering, pain, and hardships that we and others go through are real. They take a toll on even those with the strongest of faith.

The thing that separates a Christian who is suffering from an unbeliever is that the unbeliever has no hope of a life after this one. Those who don’t know Jesus have nothing to look at and say, ‘One day this suffering, this pain, will be over and I will experience life without this hardship’.

Those who have put their faith in Jesus have an assurance from Jesus Christ himself that this life is not the end. We may suffer in this life, we may go through pain, we may lose loved ones. Unless Jesus comes before that time, we will all die. But we can hold fast to the joy that is ours in Jesus Christ. One day we will enter into a life with no more aches and pains, no more sorrow, no more grief, no more pain, no more persecution, no more sickness, no more death.

Karl Barth, a Christian theologian and ­­­leader in the church in Germany that actively opposed Hitler and his regime in WWII, said 'in the face of human suffering the joy of a Christian stands as a defiant ‘Nevertheless!’. Even though we struggle, even though we suffer, our joy can still stand firm because of the God that we serve.

Jesus said **Luke 6:22–23 ESV — 22** “Blessed are you when people hate you and when they exclude you and revile you and spurn your name as evil, on account of the Son of Man! **23** Rejoice in that day, and leap for joy, for behold, your reward is great in heaven; for so their fathers did to the prophets.

James says **James 1:2–4 ESV — 2** Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds, **3** for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness. **4** And let steadfastness have its full effect, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing.

We don’t have joy because of those hardships. We have joy despite them. We have joy because we can see beyond them. The source of our joy is not in what happens to us, it is in a God who does not change, who is always there for us regardless of our circumstances. We can rejoice when hardships come along because they are an opportunity to remain faithful to Jesus, even when the world around us is telling us to give up. We can rejoice when trials come because they are an opportunity for our faith to grow. That is all because of the one that is the source of our joy: God himself.

To make sure that our joy stays strong when hardships come, we must be firmly rooted in Jesus. Jesus says in:

**John 15:4–11 ESV — 4** 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. **5** I am the vine; you are the branches. Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing… **8** By this my Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit and so prove to be my disciples. **9** As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Abide in my love. **10** If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father’s commandments and abide in his love. **11** These things I have spoken to you, that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be full.

You see, we don’t get the fruit of the Spirit by trying to acquire them. We don’t get the fruit of the Spirit by pursuing them. Joy cannot be pursued simply for the sake of joy. You could describe joy as the satisfaction we get when we have found something we’ve been looking for. That means pursuing joy is like looking for something not because you want to find that thing, but because you want the enjoyment or satisfaction of finding something.

CS Lewis said, ‘joy cannot be pursued for its own sake; rather, joy is a byproduct whose very existence presupposes that you do not desire it, but something other and outer’. It is not for joy’s sake that we find joy, it is by finding something else, experiencing something else or someone else that truly satisfies us.

We find joy by pursing something greater, something outside ourselves. We find joy when we pursue a relationship with Jesus. We find joy when we abide in Jesus and allow the Holy Spirit to do the work in us that he can only do when we are connected with him.

Last year when the pumpkins the kids carved were old, we tossed them out into the weeds behind our shed. This year we had some volunteer pumpkins growing behind the shed. There were three pumpkins just starting to grow on the vines. One day the kids were playing out there and Mae came running up to me holding a vine with a little pumpkin attached. She was so excited that we had pumpkins growing that she pulled the vine right off.

That pumpkin grew as long as it was attached to the vine. It stopped growing as soon as that connection was severed. We ended up with two decent sized pumpkins and one that never grew because it was no longer connected to the vine that gave it life.

Paul calls these the fruit of the Spirit, not the fruit of our hard work and effort to be better. We don’t gain the fruit of the Spirit by trying to acquire them. We gain the fruit of the Spirit by allowing the Holy Spirit to work in our lives. The only thing that we can change by our own wills is our behavior. We can form new habits, we can try to be better than we were before.

The Holy Spirit doesn’t change behavior. He changes our hearts, and that’s work that only God can do. Once our hearts are changed, our actions will change accordingly. The only way that we can begin to produce the fruit of the Spirit in our lives is by staying connected with Jesus so his life can flow through us. So his Spirit can change our hearts.

Any farmer or gardener will tell you that there is nothing they can do to make their plants grow and produce fruit. The only thing they can do is make the conditions as good as they can be. They cultivate the soil. They add fertilizer. They make sure the plants are watered correctly. But with all that work, it’s still not the farmer that makes the plants grow.

The same is true of our hearts. We cannot do the work of changing our hearts and producing the fruit of the Spirit, but we can cultivate and fertilize. We can make conditions as good as we can be to allow the Holy Spirit to do his work in us.

1. Be humble

One of the greatest obstacles to the fruit of the Spirit, and to joy in particular, is self-centeredness. True joy is centered on circumstances outside ourselves. If we are only focused on us, then whatever enjoyment, whatever happiness we get, will be just that, not true joy.

If you look back at all the people who had true joy in Scripture, even those who had joy in the midst of suffering, humility always came first. Paul, Silas, Jesus – their journey toward joy always began with humility. If we are focused on ourselves, on our comfort, on our happiness, it will always get in the way of true joy.

1. Make worship a priority

Worship is a shift in focus. It shifts our focus away from ourselves, away from what the world has to offer, and back toward God, where it should be. When we come together in worship, we are coming together bring glory to God. It should be an occasion marked with joy. Worship brings us into the presence of God, into the presence of Jesus. That alone should be cause for rejoicing. We see the disciples rejoicing at the resurrection in Matt 28, at Jesus’ ascension in Luke 24, we see David talk about rejoicing in God’s presence throughout the Psalms.

My question for you, is do you get excited about worshipping God? Or is it just something you do because you are supposed to? Is it just something you endure? Compare that to how you react to sports. Do you get fired up when your team wins? Or maybe more importantly when you team loses?

When the Boston Red Sox won the world series in 2013, fans took to the streets and began flipping cars, trying to knock over trees, causing all kinds of damage. In 2011, when the Vancouver Canucks lost the Stanley Cup to the Boston Bruins, the Canucks fans caused millions of dollars in damage and over 100 of them were arrested, two for stabbing other people during the riots, all because their favorite team lost a game.

Why is it that we can get so excited and enthusiastic about sports, but not about God? We need to make worship a priority if we want to cultivate joy in our lives.

1. Focus on eternal joy, not temporary happiness

Our culture encourages us to focus on ourselves and our own comfort and happiness. Seeking happiness is seen to be one of the greatest goals in life. The pursuit of happiness is even built into our Declaration of Independence.

Advertisers try to convince us that we cannot be happy without their product. Last year advertisers spent $5 million to secure 30 seconds worth of commercial time during the Superbowl. All to convince you that you can’t be happy without their product. Can we be joyful people, focused on others, focused on God, and yet always be after the next big thing? The things of this world crowd out our focus on God. They pull our focus from the eternal joy that we have back down to the moment by moment feeling of happiness.

Part of cultivating joy in our lives is being content and not running after the things of the world. That’s not always easy in a world that tries to convince you at every step that you’ll never be happy without the latest and greatest.

1. Don’t let anything steal your joy

Our men’s accountability group meets every Thursday morning to keep each other on track and following faithfully after Jesus. We simply have a list of questions that we ask each other every week and talk about how we’re doing in those areas and how we can help each other improve.

One of the most powerful questions I think we have used is this: What have you allowed to steal your joy? That question brings up things that we don’t normally notice. It’s a question about your focus. It’s a question that makes you think about how you have allowed your focus on God’s eternal promise to be pulled away to something temporary. As we’re cultivating our hearts to allow the Holy Spirit to do his work in us, I think that’s one of the best questions we could ask. What have you allowed to steal your joy?

Be humble. Make worship a priority. Focus on eternal joy. And don’t let anything or anyone steal that joy from you. Don’t let anything keep you from staying connected to Jesus. If you stay connected to him the Holy Spirit will be able to do the work in your life that only he can do. And I think you will soon find that the harvest he produces is an excellent one.

1. Conzelmann, H., & Zimmerli, W. (1964–). [χαίρω, χαρά, συγχαίρω, χάρις, χαρίζομαι, χαριτόω, ἀχάριστος, χάρισμα, εὐχαριστέω, εὐχαριστία, εὐχάριστος](https://ref.ly/logosres/tdnt?ref=biblio.at%3d%CF%87%CE%B1%CE%AF%CF%81%CF%89%2c%2520%CF%87%CE%B1%CF%81%CE%AC%2c%2520%CF%83%CF%85%CE%B3%CF%87%CE%B1%CE%AF%CF%81%CF%89%2c%2520%CF%87%CE%AC%CF%81%CE%B9%CF%82%2c%2520%CF%87%CE%B1%CF%81%CE%AF%CE%B6%CE%BF%CE%BC%CE%B1%CE%B9%2c%2520%CF%87%CE%B1%CF%81%CE%B9%CF%84%CF%8C%CF%89%2c%2520%E1%BC%80%CF%87%CE%AC%CF%81%CE%B9%CF%83%CF%84%CE%BF%CF%82%2c%2520%CF%87%CE%AC%CF%81%CE%B9%CF%83%CE%BC%CE%B1%2c%2520%CE%B5%E1%BD%90%CF%87%CE%B1%CF%81%CE%B9%CF%83%CF%84%CE%AD%CF%89%2c%2520%CE%B5%E1%BD%90%CF%87%CE%B1%CF%81%CE%B9%CF%83%CF%84%CE%AF%CE%B1%2c%2520%CE%B5%E1%BD%90%CF%87%CE%AC%CF%81%CE%B9%CF%83%CF%84%CE%BF%CF%82%7Cau%3dConzelmann%2c%2520Hans%3bZimmerli%2c%2520Walther%7Cpg%3d359%E2%80%93415%7Cvo%3d9&off=8017&ctx=3%3b+30:8%3b+89:14.%EF%BB%BF27%EF%BB%BF%0a~Joy+is+not+just+inwa). G. Kittel, G. W. Bromiley, & G. Friedrich (Eds.), *Theological dictionary of the New Testament* (electronic ed., Vol. 9, p. 363). Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)