

life groups study guide

joy - wk. 2



LIFE GROUPS

doing life together

Small groups exist at Kingsway to provide authentic relationships for the life application of the CORE 4 elements of worship, grow, serve, and share

"Joy lies in the fight, in the attempt, in the suffering involved, not in the victory itself"

Mahatma Gandhi

"Joy can be real only if people look upon their life as a service, and have a definite object in life outside themselves and their personal happiness"

Leo Tolstoy

"Joy is a net of love by which you can catch souls."

Mother Teresa of Calcutta

Defining our terms

As we find ourselves in the midst of a sermon series on joy, I think it's important to really define what joy is – and perhaps more importantly, what it is not. I think a most popular means of getting to a definition is to contrast joy and happiness; one being internal and present regardless of situations and circumstances and one being a by-product of pleasant circumstances and external happenings. While I think there is a little truth in this comparison, I also believe that it is far too simplistic. Taken to its natural conclusion, it would be seem that Christians are always joyful regardless of any external influence. And while that may sound all nice and holy, is that really true? Conversely, it would also seem that, if the comparison is true in and of itself, that you cannot be happy unless things are going your way. Is that true as well? Where is the truth?

Q :: What is joy? Try to really dig deep here and avoid the easy Christian-ese answer.

Q :: Is joy different than happiness? How?

Q :: If joy is this deep internal, abiding thing, is it not then necessary that it manifests itself via external happiness?

I believe, like so much else in our Christian walk, that it comes down to an issue of balance. Chuck Swindoll has famously said that the problem with many Christians is that they look like they've been baptized in pickle juice. But at the same time we perpetrate a fraud if we slap a fake grin on our faces when the reality we're experiencing is quite different.

The sorrowful Psalmist

Ofentimes it is wrongly believed that to be overcome by emotions of sorrow or sadness somehow makes us less Christian. I would challenge that notion as well. Take a look at Psalm 42. Verse 1 is one of the more well-known verses in Scripture: "As the deer pants for springs of water, so my soul pants for you O God." I mean, they even turned that verse into a song. But many may be surprised by the contents of the rest of that particular Psalm. It's hardly something you'll find yourself singing.

Read Psalm 42: 3-8

As writer of one the Psalms, the author is a man of God. Yet he is overwhelmed, circumstantially, to the point of noting the downcast nature of his soul – not just once, but three times in this one short Psalm (and once more if you count Psalm 43, which scholars believe was once part of Psalm 42 but was separated later on, possibly for liturgical reasons).

This also shows us that just because we are Christians, that doesn't mean we will not have times of dryness. That although we have been given joy, that it is always present. Psalm 30 tells us that sorrow may last for a night, but joy comes in the morning. That makes it pretty clear that joy can also be absent from a believer's life for a time. After all, Ecclesiastes 3:4 tells us that there is appointed both a time to mourn and a time to dance.

Q :: What are some clues given in Psalm 42 (and even in 43) for the reasons behind the spiritual depression the author finds himself mired in?

Q :: Obviously, there are joy-killers; things that rise up against us and (at the very least) threaten to steal our joy. In addition to those listed by the writer of these two Psalms, what are some other joy-killers that we may have to deal with?

I believe the first verse of Psalm 42 should be viewed through a slightly different lens than the one I have traditionally used when considering this verse, given it's context in the Psalm as a whole. Often it is used as a general statement as to the kind of desire we should have for God. While true, I think that is far too simplistic and I would agree with commentaries that suggest that the deer pants for the water because it is pressed by hunters (as the author is himself pressed by his enemies). It is need of relief, and recognizes the water as source of refreshing that will enable it to go on. Given the context of everything else going on in this Psalm, I believe it paints a more desperate picture than that of a deer strolling majestically through the mountains and stopping to take a drink. I think it points to a need to realize, on an instinctive level, that our situation can be desperate and we have one source – outside ourselves – where we can find refreshment and that which is needed to carry on in the fight.

Q :: When pressed, what are some sources we look to for refreshment that are NOT God?

Q :: The expressed, deep desire for God in Psalm 42:1 is revealed in the context of some very intense self-analysis from the author, during which he shines a harsh light on his own lack of joy. What does this say about the need for honest self-assessment in our own Christian walk? Is it necessary for recognizing God as our true source of refreshment, and ultimately, joy?

Finding the key

So if joy can be so difficult to maintain sometimes, how do we find it? The Bible is rife with promises of it. It is one of the fruit of the spirit – the second one listed, actually, after love. I think that is monumentally important, and perhaps even, not accidental. We know how important love is to God, right? We are told that the greatest commandment is to love the Lord with all our heart, soul and mind – and that the second is like it; to love our neighbor as ourself. Jesus Himself, said this was the most important thing. We are also told in scripture that others will know we are Christians by our love. It is to be our calling card, our distinguishing characteristic as believers. We are to “out-love” the world to such an extent that it draws attention to the source of that love and identifies us with Him.

But what if love is actually also the key to our joy? Jesus says it is. The joy He longs for us to have, is directly tied to love. Read John 15:9-17.

Let's dissect this a little. Jesus tells us to remain in His love. How do we do that? He says if we keep His commands, we remain in His love. He then says “I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete”. I love how the Amplified Bible translates this verse: *“I have told you these things, that My joy and delight may be in you, and that your joy and gladness may be of full measure and complete and overflowing.”* We're talking joy that is rich, full and lacking nothing. So then it's a matter of discerning what “commands” he is saying we have to obey. My knee-jerk reaction is to think He's referring to the Ten Commandments. But He is not. He spells it out for us in verse 12 so we don't miss it. “My command is this: Love each other as I have loved you.” He then paints a picture of the kind of love He's talking about. Not the superficial sort that merely talks a good game – but one marked by immense sacrifice on the part of the love-giver. And before moving on to the next topic, He makes sure we get it one more time. Verse 17 repeats it – “This is my command: Love each other.”

Q :: Jesus does not say He is going to make us joyful - but that He is going to give us “*His* joy” (“that my joy may be in you.”). Why is that an important distinction? What’s the difference?

Q :: Assuming we’re not going to be called to literally lay down our life for a friend, what are some characteristics of the kind of love Jesus wants us to have for each other? OK, the easy answer is that it is to be a love like that which Jesus has for us – so let’s rephrase the question and look at that first. Apart from His dying for us, how does Jesus’ love for us manifest itself? In what specific ways does He deal with us that demonstrate His love for us? Make a list of responses.

Look back at your list. *That* is the answer to how we originally started that last question. Those are some practical ways that we are to demonstrate our love for others. Take a moment to look at the list again. Begin to think of some tangible ways, and some specific tactics you can use to accomplish this to those God has already brought into your sphere of influence – beginning with those living under your roof.

Joy must be fought for

Were bearing the fruit of joy easy, we’d have joyful Christians as far as the eye could see. Truth is, it is not easy – and for a variety of reasons. Nehemiah 8:10 concludes by telling us that “the joy of the LORD is your strength.” At least, that is the NIV translation. This scripture is so key! That is one of the reasons that Satan tries so hard to steal our joy as Christians. It is why many struggle with Christian depression and anxiety disorders. God has given us His joy *to be our strength*.

Actually, the NIV translation of that verse falls a little short. In the Greek, the original word they used for strength in that verse meant *not only* strength, but also **defense, rock, fortress, stronghold, and force!** Christian joy is supposed to be all of those things for me on a daily basis. Do you see the different tone of those other words? Do they not connote a warfare or battle that is going on? If Satan can get me to live a life without joy, it will inevitably be a life without the power to fight the good fight of faith. This also emphasizes the importance of joy. Of all things, Christian joy is what God says is my strength. When I am denying myself the opportunity to enjoy my life (Christ came that we might have life - and life in abundance), I am actually disarming myself against the enemy’s attacks.

Q :: Why, of all things, does the Bible say joy is our strength?

Q :: How can joy become a weapon of spiritual warfare whereby it functions as a defense, rock, fortress, stronghold or even a force? How does it function in those capacities?

Conclusion

A joyless Christian walk is something that really must be addressed. Not merely for ourselves, but for the sake of God’s Kingdom relative to a world that is lost and needs the Lord. Dr. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, in his book *Spiritual Depression, its Causes and Cure*, writes: “In a sense a depressed Christian is a contradiction in terms, and he is a very poor recommendation for the gospel. We are living in a pragmatic age. People today are not primarily interested in Truth but they are interested in results. The one question they ask is: Does it work?” Later he adds: “The devil’s one object is so to depress God’s people that he can go to the man of the world and say: These are God’s people. Do you want to be like that?”

I strongly believe this is not a call to be superficial and fake, throwing on our churchy happy-face and pretending that everything else is OK when it is really not. That can do as much harm as walking around under a continual dark cloud. But I do believe Lloyd-Jones’ words are a very powerful reminder that real joy; joy that is complete, lacking nothing; the joy Jesus longs to give us – *His* joy – is opposed by the enemy of our souls and is worth fighting for. And that being content to walk in the absence of joy can create a roadblock to making unbelievers long for what we have.