* **Philippians Series Slide**
* Pete Holmes grew up in a pretty conservative Christian environment with a conservative Christian family.
* Pete is now a comedian and a writer. He also is no longer a Xian.
* I came across his memoir- “Comedy Sex God” a year or so ago, and it intrigued me for two reasons.
* First, because I love to read comedians- who are our modern day pop- philosophers.
* On the opening page of his memoir he writes, **“My mom always wanted me to be a youth pastor. When I became a comedian, she said, “Close enough”.**
* There’s some truth in that.
* The second reason it intrigued me is because Pete Holmes is no longer a Xian. He now calls himself a “Christ-leaning spiritual seeker”.
* In other words, Pete came to a crisis of faith…and he deconstructed what he believed.
* I’ve been reading and listening to and reading deconstruction stories for the last 5 years or so. They interest me because they challenge my own faith. If somebody finds something out that I’ve never considered, I want to test it. I want to know if its true. I want to think about it. Because I don’t want to have a faith in Jesus that can only exist if I plug my ears up and refuse to listen to anyone else’s ideas, interpretations, or experiences.
* That makes my faith very weak and fragile. So that’s one reason I listen to people who have deconstructed their faith.
* I also do it to understand people. If I don’t listen to why people leave the Christian faith, I can’t minister to those people to lead them to a true understanding of Jesus.
* So- I read Pete Holmes’ memoir to find out why he stopped being a Christ Follower and started calling himself a “Christ-leaning spiritual seeker”.
* I want to read you a couple of passages hopefully that will highlight his reasoning.
* **“Barry Taylor, the road manager for AC/DC, put it this way: ‘God is the name of the blanket we throw over the mystery to give it shape.’ Come on- shouldn’t I have heard this in church? Why am I hearing this from the road manager for AC/DC?**
* **“God has never been a mystery to me! The whole point of God was something to hold on to. Church was *certainty* worship- we sang songs that celebrated our *IN-ness* as we prayed for and quietly pitied those who were out. God was something to calm the masses, to help us *STOP* asking questions, to tick boxes so we could move on with our lives and think about other things.**
* **“I started to see how a spirituality based on facts is only really helpful for making groups, building walls, or stitching flags, but when your spirituality becomes about a feeling, you see how private and personal faith really is. *You* feel a feeling. No one else can feel it for you. And myth makes the story about *you*, about *you* transforming, *you* seeing how it all really is.**
* Ok, there’s some irony in that. He just told me- as a fact- that faith cannot be based on facts- and that’s what he bases his faith on. That fact.
* But, instead of picking apart Pete’s passionate pericope-(you guys like that one- worked hard on it)- lets actually listen to something he is saying.
* His point is that what he learned in church was facts about God to defend from people who disputed those facts.
* Following Jesus was reduced to information. At the center of his faith was a set of facts.
* This is why Video or Zoom can never be a real long-term substitute for actually being with the people of God. Sure- it is sometimes the best you can do given a pandemic or illness or physical limitations- but it is not the same.
* Because God is more than information. He is not just OBJECTIVE- in the sense there are facts to KNOW about him… We also experience God SUBJECTIVELY- we feel him.
* **Title Slide “Mirth Control: How to Feel God- and Start Smiling Again”- Philippians 1:1-11**
* Think about these words- Joy & Love.
* Sure- you could put some objective definitions on those words- but those words are nothing until they are experienced. They are nothing until you feel them.
* I’ll be the first to admit- I grew up with the same stuff Pete Holmes did. I worshipped Objectivity and pushed away from mystery. Subjectivity & FEELINGS- were not to be trusted.
* In fact- for both me and Pete Holmes- it was the failure of our marriages that caused us to start seeking something we could feel. Something deeper than just information.
* But we went two different directions. Pete left the Christian faith for a version of Jesus that reduced even Jesus’ resurrection to a figure of speech.
* By God’s grace, I came to understand that the deeper I experienced God’s love, the more real and necessary Jesus’ death and resurrection were to me.
* In short, facts need feelings…and feelings need facts.
* Feelings without facts is a Hallmark greeting card- it gives me the fuzzies but I throw it away once I’m done with it. No lasting impact.
* Facts without feelings is the written portion of the Driver’s test at the DMV. Sure- you might know the laws- it don’t mean you can drive or ever have.
* SO- what you should not hear me saying is “FOLLOW YOUR FEELINGS. DO WHAT FEELS RIGHT.”
* That is absolutely NOT what I’m saying.
* Instead, I’m asking you to consider that God makes whole people. Our feelings, our emotions are VERY IMPORTANT because those feelings make up who we are as people created in God’s image.
* And that means that our feelings are absolutely something that Jesus died and resurrected in order to make right. To realign with God.

The god that Pete Hughes left- The impersonal god of the DMV- is not the God of the Bible. God is also not the Hallmark Card god of how you feel in the moment that Pete is chasing now.

* He’s neither of those. He’s other. He’s Holy.
* And when you meet him- when you subjectively encounter this objective God- Joy and Love is what happens in increasing measure.
* For the next 7 weeks we are going to make our way through the NT book of Philippians.

It's a letter that the Apostle Paul wrote to a church and Paul’s primary message is about the joy.

Oh- and did I mention- he’s writing it from prison. So you know, this is not some cheap Hallmark warm, fuzzy joy. This is indestructible, unflinching no matter the circumstance Joy. This is joy that can be experienced even in grief, pain, heartache, and suffering.

Today, I want to show you how to Feel God- and hopefully- start smiling again.

**Philippians 1:1-11**

* **Paul and Timothy, servants of Christ Jesus:**
* **To all the saints in Christ Jesus who are in Philippi, including the overseers and deacons.**
* **2 Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.**
* **3 I give thanks to my God for every remembrance of you, 4 always praying with joy for all of you in my every prayer, 5 because of your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now. 6 I am sure of this, that he who started a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus. 7 Indeed, it is right for me to think this way about all of you, because I have you in my heart, and you are all partners with me in grace, both in my imprisonment and in the defense and confirmation of the gospel. 8 For God is my witness, how deeply I miss all of you with the affection of Christ Jesus. 9 And I pray this: that your love will keep on growing in knowledge and every kind of discernment, 10 so that you may approve the things that are superior and may be pure and blameless in the day of Christ, 11 filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ to the glory and praise of God.**
* Transition: Lets start with something simple to say…but can take a lifetime to learn
* **1) Joy is an indestructible smile.**
  + The smile has gotten a bad rap in our age of authenticity.
  + Smiling has been associated with being fake. disingenuous.
  + And, look, I get that.
  + We have abused the smile. We’ve used it to cover up and hide. You know, you’re falling apart inside- but you just laugh your way through it.
  + So what we’ve taught ourselves is that when you see someone who is smiling a lot- that they are really just covering up some deeper pain.
  + We’ve adopted this cheap version of authenticity. What we really mean is if you’re happy- you aren’t authentic. If you’re sad- you are telling the truth.
  + I’m throwing a flag on that play. And listen- I’m like Lassie carrying a Honeydew- Call me Mr. Melancholy. Like I legit TRY to cry every day.
  + But, being real, being honest, being authentic is not a synonym for sadness.
  + **V 3-4**
  + Paul is writing this letter from jail. Where he is under threat of death.
  + And yet, you can feel his indestructible smile through these words.
  + He gives thanks to his God…as he remembers the people of the Philippian church.
  + “Look at this photograph…every time I do it makes me laugh”
  + He’s praying for them with joy.
  + And somehow- the Christian version of joy often gets reduced to some oxymoronic unsmiling happiness.
  + “I have joy, but it's a sad, serious joy that I keep locked deep down in MY COLD DEAD HEART”
  + But- try thinking about something beautiful, something wonderful, some memory of a dear friend- or something worth celebrating- and then try to hold back a smile. At some point- deep joy- unflinching in the face of a prison sentence or even death- has got to come out in a smile.
* **Back to 1)**
  + Listen- I know everybody is different. And I certainly am not here today to change your personality.
  + I simply want to make the point that joy and pain can…and should happen at the same time.
  + I love that we can weep with happiness. I love that beauty brings joy and tears.
  + This is one of the most cherished gifts that God gives us as we await Jesus’ return- the ability to mourn and smile- at the same time. The ability to be upset about injustice, but glad about the justice that God will bring.
  + It is possible- in fact- it is a gift of the Holy Spirit- that no matter the circumstances- there is a well of joy to draw from that never runs dry.
  + The question is- do you know how to access it? Do you know how to find it when the queso hits the fan?
  + Do you know how to get an indestructible smile?
* **Transition:** Let’s talk first horizontally first. Person to person- how can we help each other develop joy.
* **2) We spark joy in one another when we meet practical needs, encourage with truth, and show heart-felt compassion.**
  + Pete Holmes’ problem with the Xianity he knew, was that it had very little feeling involved.
  + But that is not at ALL the picture that Paul draws up here.
  + **V 7a (end at heart) & 8**
  + I mean he’s using language like “I have you in my heart” and “I really miss you- Sometimes I think I feel as strongly about you as Jesus does!
  + This are all terms of deep feeling and affection.
  + They are empathetic, compassionate terms.
  + Paul clearly cares about these people- and he is not afraid to show it, or to put it into words.
  + He has developed emotional ties- and that is a very good thing.
  + **V 5**
  + And those emotional ties came when the people of Phillipi helped to meet Paul’s financial church planting need.
  + In fact, the whole occasion of this letter is a GIANT Thank you to the Philippian church for sending money to Paul when he was in need.
  + That practical need-meeting helped deepen Paul’s connection with this church.
  + That’s what he means by “partnership in the gospel”. They sent an offering to Paul to support his missionary efforts.
  + This ever happen to you?
  + Ever been in a financial pinch- and somebody sends you a card that shows that they are thinking about you, praying for you, and they want to help- with a gift card, a meal.
  + Church- my spirits have often buoyed by friends- partners in the gospel- who are attuned with my needs and freely and joyfully give to meet those practical and financial needs.
  + This is a huge role that our community groups play. We share each others needs and we work together to meet those needs.
  + Raise your hand if your community group or church family has ever met a practical need in your life?
  + **V 6**
  + Finally, listen to Paul provide encouragement that is based in the truth he knows about Jesus.
  + Listen to this. I am SURE of this- That God- who started a good work in them will complete it…carry it on to completion in Christ Jesus.
  + This is what we need in our relationships to spark joy. Reminders of God’s faithfulness to finish what he started. Because, honestly, sometimes it just feels like we’re stuck. But Paul says, “I know our God. I know what Jesus did and what he’s going to do. And I know you. And that’s why I can tell you with confidence- He is not finished with you yet. Get your head up. Look to him. He will see you through to the day he returns.
* **Back to 2)**
  + This is the way a community sparks joy in one another. As we meet practical needs- encourage with deep truths, and express hear-felt compassion and empathy to one another....joy will grow.
* **Transition:** Finally, lets talk about the real source of joy…how joy grows vertically…between humans and God.
* **3) Joy comes from love. Love grows by experiential knowledge of God and then seeing the world through that experience.**
  + Pete Holmes left Xianity because he felt like it put God in a box.
  + For him, it seemed as if because there are 66 books in the Bible, there is only so much you can know about God, and then you sort of level off.
  + And his church discouraged him from ever asking questions. From ever expressing doubts or fears. Just read the bible and defend it.
  + This is a huge mistake.
  + Parents, please don’t think you are keeping your kids “safe” by not exposing them to different ideas about God. Unless by safe you mean setting them up to de-convert later in life.
  + And, with the internet, those ideas are going to come to them much earlier and more rapidly.
  + See, Xianity is not based on asking less questions. This passage encourages theological curiosity.
  + **V9**
  + Paul prays for the Philippians love to grow.
  + That word love is “agape” in the Greek.
  + It's the NT version of Hesed.
  + It is a love that is specific to God…and shared by him with humans.
  + Its covenant keeping love.
  + More to the point- it is sacrificial love. And indeed, Paul’ joy in this letter is sparked by the financial sacrifice that the Philippians have made on his behalf.
  + So his prayer is that they grow in this Christ-like sacrificial love. A love that he describes in chapter 2 as considering others more important than yourself.
  + He asks God for MORE of that for them.
  + And how does that sacrificial love grow?
  + How do you joyously give more of yourself and your resources away to help others flourish?
  + 2 ways.
  + First- grow in intimate knowledge of God.
  + Now- this word knowledge here does not mean facts.
  + It's a very specific word.
  + Its not knowing things about God…its knowing God’s heart. Its feeling God. This is experiential knowledge.
  + This sort of knowledge stresses the process of knowing, rather than the outcome of knowing.
  + For example.
  + Someone could tell you a lot of facts about me.
  + They could say. He’s funny. Or he’s crazy. Or He does this thing where he makes up words and phrases and says them over and over until you begin to addictively say them without even thinking.
  + And all those things maybe true.
  + BUT- until you live with me…or go on a road trip with me- until we take a journey together- get around each other…then you don’t have this experiential knowledge
  + But when you get it…and then you talk with another friend about me…those facts all hit you in a different way.
  + And often- this stuff comes out at our funerals. Even at death, those indestructible smiles come out- because our love had grown for that person in our experiential knowledge.
  + Listen- the point of the Bible is not to simply sell you a bunch of facts about God. Its to go on a journey with God.
  + To stop reading ABOUT God- and listen TO HIM.
  + That’s the aim of prayer and Scripture. Its not you giving God facts about your life and him giving you facts about himself.
  + Its talking. Sharing. Journeying together. Experiential knowledge. A very relational and subjective experience- that is rooted in his OBJECTIVE word.
  + God wants you to be curious about him. He WANTS you to ask questions- even hard ones…just like I delight when my sons ask me hard questions. Sitting in the front seat of the car. They are opening up to me…and it allows me to open up to them.
  + This is part of gaining experiential knowledge.
  + Note the second thing that Paul says is going to grow their sacrificial love.
  + Every kind of discernment.
  + To understand what that means- take a look at the next verse
  + **V 10**
  + He says that discernment allows you to look out at the world you live in and determine what things line up with God’s agape love.
  + He says- the more you are able to evaluate and judge the things of this world- whether they are good or bad, because you have deeply experienced God’s love- Well…the more love you will have and the deeper your joy will be.
  + This word pure is a combination of the word “Sun” and “Judge”
  + It means to hold something up to the light to inspect it.
  + Like you might hold up a $100 dollar bill to see if it is authentic or counterfeit.
  + In a phrase- discernment is holding the world up to light of God’s love- and seeing what matches with it and what doesn’t.
  + Let me give you an example in my life of how I’ve seen my joy grow as I’ve practiced discernment.
* **Back to 3)**
  + In some ways, I grew up in a very bubbled off safe Xian environment. Again- not unlike Pete Holmes. All discernment- all judging what was SUPERIOR and PURE was done for me.
  + That, no doubt, can be appropriate for children.
  + But, as many of us do, we get lazy. And I got used to this being discernment being done for me. I came to college, and even entered into marriage, with most of my discernment having been done for me.
  + So I learned whether or not a movie or a piece of music was “superior” or “pure” based on the rating it had- or the subject matter- or whether or not it carried the label “Christian”.
  + And I filed things into categories- “Christian” and “Secular”.
  + So- if a Christian said it- especially a Xian in “my tribe”- said it…then it must be true.
  + And if one of those bad- secular people said it…it must be untrue.
  + But that just makes things too simple.
  + I actually learned a lot of people labeled Xian were saying some pretty ugly- non-God glorifying things.
  + I also learned- that movie directors, musicians, playwrights, friends- even enemies- that fell into the “secular” category- when I held some of the art they were producing…and the things they were saying- when I held it up to the sun of God’s love… I could actually see something true and beautiful. Even the Road Manager for AC/DC can say something profound about God.
  + In other words, I was practicing discernment. And that discernment grew my love for God and for other people.
  + Movies and music and literature and conversations with non-Xians all took on a new turn for me. I was finding the beauty of God everywhere. And it opened up opportunities for me to share that truth with some of those people I was talking with- rather than simply enjoy another Christian album or Christian movie with my Christian bubble.
  + Which only increases my joy. The more people that can experience God’s love with me- the more joy I have.
  + **V 9**
  + See love is meant to overflow. That’s what Paul says here. Love keeps on growing and growing. It doesn't stop. It has no ceiling.
  + This is who God is. Love.
  + Ever growing overflowing Love. that encourages, meets practical needs and does so sacrificially.
  + That is what the Good new about Jesus teaches us.
  + When Jesus died on a cross and resurrected- God was loving us like this. Creating Joy in us.
  + He encouraged us. I will do something for you that you can’t. I will start a work to make you new- and I will bring it to completion.
  + He met our practical needs. Without Jesus’ resurrection and death in our place- we were perishing. We were without hope. We were dead in our sins. We needed rescue. He met that need.
  + And he did so sacrificially. With Joy. Hebrews says that because of the joy set before him, he endured the shame of the cross. He laid his life down for us, to cleanse of all unrighteousness.
  + So that we could know God experientially…with feeling…with joy.
* Listen, for some of you this message has been encouraging. It's the boost that you need to smile again. To take God at his word…and begin serving others, encouraging others, and loving…even through your pain. You are to start looking for sacrificial love in everything. To start reading your Bible as a journey to know God experientially…and you are ready to start looking at the world through eyes of discernment- seeing his beauty everywhere.
* To some, you had a hard time hearing this today. Because you are in a low spot…and its just really difficult to think about a smile in the middle of your suffering. I understand that. I’ve been there. My encouragement to you is not to cut God off. And don’t cut his church off. Let him in. And let people in. Flourishing starts by increasing vulnerability and taking meaningful action. Share with somebody this week. Share where you are. Open yourself up to be encouraged.
* Let me pray for you.