

Feb 10

Living with Joy

Philippians 4:4-13

For weeks we have been talking about all the things that can steal joy from our lives. Bitterness, negativity, busyness and more all have the potential to suck the joy, and here we are talking about that deep satisfaction with life, right out of our existence. Today we are going to focus on how we can live a joy-filled life no matter what is happening around us. To live with joy we must adopt a proactive, positive approach to life. We must begin every day with a plan and then follow it. If you do this long enough it will become a life giving pattern. When we are able to accept and celebrate where we are, and see how God is at work in this moment and how we can be God's light in this situation we will find joy.

No one models the positive steps that lead to a joy-filled life as much as does the apostle Paul. That is an amazing statement when you think about it. Paul was ostracized by his friends, persecuted by his enemies, subjected to immense physical suffering, and was constantly burdened by his concern for the young churches he had planted. Much of his environment worked against him feeling joy. We also need to realize that being at peace and living with joy was not Paul's natural condition. He wasn't an optimistic, glass-is-half-full kind of guy. You see glimpses of the hard-edged, sometimes angry, person Paul could be. He had to learn to be content. The longer he journeyed with Christ, the longer he tried to apply the principals that he enumerates in this letter to the Philippians, the more Paul becomes a joy filled Christian. Finally, in prison, knowing he might be near the end of his life Paul could write that he had learned to be content no matter what life throws at him. Don't you want that kind of contentment? Don't you want the joy that can come to us in faith? I think you do, so let us look to Paul for how to achieve this.

We find Paul's recipe for joy in this letter. In prison, Paul writes to the church in Philippi. Four little chapters that commentators often refer to as the epistle of joy. Fifteen times Paul writes about his joy or calls upon the Philippians to rejoice. He doesn't clearly spell out his formula for living with joy but it is there. We will have to dig a little to find it. We know it would work for us because if Paul can learn to be content so can we! Paul's words and his example tell us that we can be at peace and live with joy.

Paul says that we need to understand that life will be hard. Somehow, we have gotten it into our heads that life is supposed to run smoothly. It is supposed to follow the schedule we have set for it and work itself out according to our predetermined plan. If

life is not doing that then something must be wrong. Then we get angry with God, at life, at other people and this leads to depression and more. Most people will not tell you that they believe life should be easy but when they face trials you hear, "Why is this happening to me?" "What have I done to deserve this?" Paul never lifts up those kinds of questions because he assumed that life was going to bring with it challenges.

You might be thinking, "Why is life hard?" It is hard because you are a physical being. Over time all things physical break down, wear out and stop working. The longer you own a car the more work you have to do to keep it on the road. The older you are, the more challenges your body gives you. I still remember the first time going to a doctor for my yearly physical and hearing, "For a man your age you are in good health." Now my health is qualified. I am aging and that must be taken into account. So instead of being angry when health issues assail you, expect them.

Life is hard because we are also connected to other people. Those connections will bring you great joy but they will also bring you pain and break your heart. Part of the reason those connections break down is because you are a difficult person. Has anyone ever told you that? Well you are! What I mean is that you sometimes make life more difficult for yourself and those around you then it has to be. We have been talking about all the choices we make that rob us of joy. Nobody makes life as hard for you as you! Everyone you meet is also a difficult person to deal with. So, don't be surprised when relationships go wrong, people say and do things that are less than kind. Relationships are difficult, expect it.

Life is hard because we live in a world that is unfair. We live in a world where bad things happen to good people. Whether it is by accident or by the evil intentions of others, you and the people you love will suffer the pain of unfairness during your lifetime. We will not always see justice or compensation. The world can be an unfair place.

Why would Paul tell us to expect life to be difficult? Paul realized that in dealing with the unfairness he also saw God at work. If we expect life to be easy, we are more likely to have disappointment and anger when things go awry. If we acknowledge life will be hard we can celebrate how God is at work in our lives when we face trials, giving thanks for friends who are there to help when our bodies break down, and rejoice in the special relationships we have even though we know we are difficult people. And if we know life can be unfair and unjust then those times when we truly live out our Christian calling and see justice, love and compassion reign we celebrate.

During the government shutdown we heard time and time again about all the struggles government workers were going through. It was unjust and unfair. But I also celebrated the great compassion people had. Businesses did amazing things for those furloughed without pay. Food banks were stocked. Kindness abounded. Expect life to be hard and then you will be surprised by the goodness and joy that unexpectedly drops into your life.

Second, to live with joy you must focus your thoughts on the goodness of life. You have the power to control your thoughts. If you want to be miserable, that is easy. Simply dredge up the things that make you unhappy. Tell yourself that you can't do otherwise. The problems and the fears and the hurts you are thinking about are so big, so important, so hurtful that you simply must think about them. It is just impossible to let them go. Focus on everything that is wrong and you will never feel right. But if you want to be content and live with joy, you will need to control your thought life. The people who are most content are the ones who focus on what is good in their lives and who refuse to look for and fixate on the negatives. Paul told the Philippians to focus on the good. It might sound trite but you would be surprised how many people need to hear it. Perhaps you! If you want a life full of joy you will need to fill your mind with the thoughts that bring joy. Fixate on what is wrong and in no time you will become dissatisfied, depressed, and defeated. When we are depressed, thinking good positive, faith-filled thoughts is particularly difficult. It takes work and energy to take the high road mentally. It is always easy to go low. When we are down it is especially important that we look up and focus on how God has blessed us.

Do you remember the song "My Favorite Things" that Julie Andrews sang in the Sound of Music? It is really good theology and Paul would approve. When she was sad or scared she focused on her favorite, positive, memories and then things did not seem so bad. You have control over where you put your focus. Paul reminds us to focus not on the difficulties but the blessings. When you feel yourself cycling down stop and shift the focus. Dwell on the good and you will again be reminded that life in God brings joy.

Finally, Paul says to the Philippians, to not be anxious about anything but with thanksgiving present your requests to God. Maybe the greatest hindrance to happiness is the idea that something "out there" will make me content. Instead, we are to be grateful for what we do have and trust God with the rest. If you are fixated on what you don't have unhappiness will flood your life. But develop the attitude of gratitude and you will begin to experience real joy. Give thanks to God for what you have and how you are blessed in this moment and give the rest to God in thanks knowing God hears.

When we fill our hearts with gratitude and trust then life can do its worst. Let it take your job, your health, your dreams, even your loved ones but God is with you. Never let the events of life take away from you the certainty that God is at work in your life. Believe as Paul did that even if you are imprisoned and in pain, you are not alone. God is with you. God will have the last word and that word will be good and you will know joy. Now you can be content.

If you are unhappy it is because you are living too small. You are yearning for more from the world to make you happy. But if you realize that you have all you need and that you are here to live with purpose, a life that matters, you will find joy in each day.

There are many ways to describe what our purpose is. Paul in Philippians writes that we should strive to become blameless and pure. If you live purposefully and intentionally your faith that will help you with many decisions you are making. It will help you keep your life focused in the right direction and your mind on the good. Live with intentionality. When you fail, and you will, seek forgiveness and move on. Don't hang on to it. Remember, we are to live without guilt. But when each day, at the end, you look at your life and can celebrate your faith victories you will also be filled with joy.

The other purpose Paul said a Christian should have is bringing light to people who are in darkness. We do this by reflecting the light of Christ. How well are you reflecting the light of Christ? The more you do this, being light in darkness, the more joy you have. After a while you no longer let external events control your attitudes. This was Paul's greatest secret. The more Christ shone through him the more contentment and joy he felt. This was why he could write an epistle that celebrates the joy of life while in prison waiting for his death. Seeing that light touch others made him realize life was good, life had meaning, life had joy and it was enough.

Living with purpose will not make your life easy. It will make you care about people who are hurting. But when you love others in this way you will no longer have to run off looking for joy because joy will have found you. May you live with the right focus on life, may you live with purpose, may Christ's line shine through you into all the dark places of life and then you will be a joyous person.