

JOY: IT'S THE MARK OF MATURITY

PHILIPPIANS 2:12-18

When the Russian comedian Yakov Smirnoff immigrated to the United States, he said that the thing he loved most about America was the grocery stores. He said, "I'll never forget walking down one of the aisles and seeing powdered milk; just add water and you get milk. Right next to it was powdered orange juice; just add water and you get orange juice. Then I saw baby powder, and I thought to myself, What a country!" What if getting spiritual maturity was that easy? Imagine some kind of powder you could mix with water and – poof! – instant spiritual maturity! I want to talk to you about maturity today.

We return to our study of Paul's letter to the first group of Christians living in and around the small city of Philippi, a Roman colony in what is now the country of Greece. Paul started this church on one of his missionary journeys. About 10 years later, he wrote them this letter while he was in prison in Rome. He'd been telling people everywhere he went about Jesus – and that Jesus was and is Lord of all. He alone is worthy of our worship and service. That conflicted with the official party line of the Roman Empire that the Roman Emperor – Caesar – was lord and that he was worthy of people's worship and service.

Paul had several reasons for writing this letter. He wanted to assure his friends in Philippi that he was OK in prison. God was using his prison experience to spread the good news about Jesus to new, unreached people. He wanted to encourage the Philippian believers because he was getting reports that indirect, subtle persecution was happening in their city. Many Philippians took great pride in being Roman citizens and would not have taken kindly to the idea that there was some other lord than Caesar. Truth be told, Paul also wanted to get after the Philippian Christians themselves a bit, too. They were having some relational problems in that church (can you imagine such a thing?!) – squabbling, conflicts, power struggles – that were a very poor witness to a community that needed to see a consistent demonstration of the love of Jesus.

What's remarkable is how often the theme of joy surfaces in Paul's letter to the Philippians. Joy - despite Paul's imprisonment. Joy - despite the challenges and obstacles that the Philippians themselves endured. The word "joy" – or another word like "joy" - turns up no less than 15 times in this short document. The word "joy" shows up again in the passage we want to zero in on. Let's read it just now. When I read that passage, I believe Paul is talking about spiritual maturity. Paul implies that spiritual maturity is the pathway to God's kind of joy. So, that's the basis of the title of today's message: joy is the mark of maturity. People often equate joy with general feelings of happiness and well being. But that's not how the Bible defines joy. God's kind of joy is the result of knowing who Jesus is and where your life fits in with Him. So, the more you understand Jesus and your relationship to Him, the greater will be your experience of God's kind of joy. I see four phrases in these verses that help me get a grip on spiritual maturity and how that relates to joy. Here's the first one.

WORK IT OUT.

There it is in v. 12-13 (NIV), “Therefore, my dear friends, as you have always obeyed—not only in my presence, but now much more in my absence—continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you to will and to act according to his good purpose.” What is “it”? What is it that you and I are supposed to work out? Well, Paul says here it’s your “salvation”. What does that mean? It’s important to realize, first of all, what Paul is not saying here. He is not teaching that you can earn an eternal relationship with God by somehow working at it through your personal efforts. You cannot get to Heaven by trying hard to be moral, by going to church, or by being a good person. Paul isn’t writing these words to people who need to get saved, but rather to people who are already saved. Furthermore, he’s writing to a group of Christians not to an individual believer. The “you” in this passage is plural not singular.

Paul’s primary point here is not about anybody’s personal salvation but rather about this local church’s – the church at Philippi - spiritual maturity. Paul wanted the Philippian Christians to get and keep their act together! They were in danger of letting all this relational garbage between themselves undermine their witness to the lost people of Philippi. We really don’t know what these internal conflicts were all about which is a good thing! If we did, we could say, “Well, we don’t have those same kinds of conflicts at KRBC, so this part of God’s Word doesn’t apply to us.” But by leaving their specific conflict undefined, God is saying that anytime a church loses its unity, or allows interpersonal relationships to become broken and bruised, or tolerates a negative atmosphere, it just short circuits its witness to the lost community around it. More on that point later!

But even though this passage is more about the spiritual maturity of a congregation than an individual’s road to personal salvation, let’s not “throw the baby out with the bathwater”! That word “salvation” in the Bible doesn’t mean what it sometimes means to Christians today. We tend to think of salvation as the day we accepted Jesus as our personal Savior or the day we got baptized. But, in the Bible, salvation is more of a process rather than an event. You were saved in the past, you are being saved in the present and you will be saved in the future. “Salvation” is a Bible word that describes God’s entire dealings with you from before you were even born, to the day you opened your heart to Jesus, to your daily walk of faith, and then on into eternity.

There are different parts and pieces to this thing the Bible calls “salvation.” One part the Bible calls justification. That refers to being made right in God’s eyes. By the grace of God, you put your faith in what Jesus did for you on the cross and your sins are forgiven. You receive the gift of eternal life. You can never deserve or earn justification; all you can do is put your total trust in Jesus and what He’s done for you. But another equally important part of salvation is sanctification. That means the process by which you become like Jesus in your character. This takes a lifetime! It means the gradual getting rid of all the

spiritual garage and junk in your life as the Holy Spirit reveals it to you. Sanctification does require your personal effort. You have to surrender spiritually to God many times over. You have to help put stuff to death inside of you that will kill you spiritually. It's like a sick person who has to take the medicine the doctor prescribes or get the surgery that is demanded. You have to engage and cooperate with Dr. Holy Spirit day after day after day. It's not joyful at the time, but – ironically – you can never get to God's kind of joy without doing this.

And notice all the help God offers to you! Paul says here that God gives you both the desire to become like Jesus and the ability to move in that direction as you cooperate with the Holy Spirit: "...for it is God who works in you to will and to act according to his good purpose." (Ph 2:13 NIV). God is far more interested that you become what He wants you to be than you are. He will do all He can do for you and in you. Your task is to cooperate, respond and obey. That's what it means to work out your salvation. Why does Paul say you should do this with "fear and trembling"? What's that about? It refers to an awareness that you can thwart God's good work in your life. You can slow down the process of salvation by refusing to cooperate with God, by being disobedient to God, by debating with God rather than responding to Him. Don't live in fear of losing your salvation, but, by all means, be afraid of grieving the Holy Spirit!

Until just a few years ago, if you had the opportunity to visit Notre Dame Cathedral in Paris, you would encounter a very impressive, but very dirty church. After hundreds of years of being exposed to the soot, dust, and smoke of Paris, Notre Dame was covered in layers of black grime. It was even difficult to make out the beautiful carvings and details on the exterior. But then the grand old cathedral went through a year-long restoration. Scaffolding was erected, and the entire exterior was sandblasted. This photograph was taken only about four months after the scaffolding was removed from the front of the cathedral, at the conclusion of several years of extremely meticulous and careful cleaning of the facade. This cleaning used a variety of methods. It involved cleaning the stone of the cathedral millimeter by millimeter, with tiny brushes, special laser treatments, and special cleaning packs. The result is breathtaking, as you can see. This is how the cathedral appeared when it was brand new—almost a thousand years ago. The ancient stones glow bright and golden. You can now see details on carvings that hadn't been visible in decades. It's like a different cathedral. Spiritually, God does the same thing to you and me through the process of sanctification. He sandblasts us. He cleans us up inch by inch. He removes years of accumulated spiritual grime and dirt. It takes a long time – usually a lifetime. But the end result is spectacular. No, it's not always a joyful, pleasant experience to be sandblasted and cleaned up spiritually, but when you consider the end result, it is joyful. It's God's kind of joy. Spiritual maturity is about working it out. Let's move on. It's also about...

SHINE IT OUT.

Do you see that in v. 14-15 (NIV)? “Do everything without complaining or arguing, so that you may become blameless and pure, children of God without fault in a crooked and depraved generation, in which you shine like stars in the universe”. Paul described the culture in which he and the Philippian Christians lived as “crooked and depraved.” That kind of sounds like our culture, don’t you think? Here’s a reminder that Christians are supposed to think and act differently than the culture in which we live. No, not in every way possible, but in key, important ways. Like what? Well, in a world in which virtually every kind of sexual act imaginable is now celebrated, God calls us to purity. In a world where lying and deceit are tolerated, God calls us to sincerity and transparency. In a world where we are encouraged to worship things, pursue wealth, and get into debt in order to possess more stuff, God calls us to a simple lifestyle and financial responsibility. In a world that tells us everyday to put yourself first, God calls us to be servants and put Him and others first. In a world that suggests that if you must be religious just keep it to yourself and don’t ever suggest that you have a corner on truth, God calls us to proclaim that Jesus is the only way, the only truth and the only life. The Bible says, “For once you were full of darkness, but now you have light from the Lord. So live as people of light!” (Eph 5:8 NLT) Christians – and the Church of Jesus Christ – ought to be as vivid a contrast with the world around us as white stars are against a black night sky. Shine it out!

Paul provides one point of contrast that’s easy to overlook. We live in a world that celebrates, enjoys, and relishes conflict, controversy, grumbling, complaining and just general negativity and relational chaos. The Philippian Christians were in danger of allowing that spiritual atmosphere to infiltrate their own church family. “Do everything without complaining and arguing,” says Paul (Ph 2:14). God has no patience with grumblers and complainers. Just read about what happened to the Israelites in the Old Testament if you want to see how God feels about grumbling. What was the issue at Philippi? We don’t know! Who cares?

The point is that when a church – any church, the church at Philippi, Karl Road Baptist Church – tolerates a negative atmosphere, puts up with a serious lack of unity, winks at bruised and broken relationships between brothers and sisters in the same church, that church is in danger of losing any effectiveness for Jesus with the lost people around it. When spiritually lost people walk into this building on a Sunday or a Wednesday or any other day, they ought to be able to sense and feel a supernatural love for one another and a unity of purpose that comes from the Holy Spirit. If they don’t, we lose our effectiveness to bring them to Jesus for salvation. Brothers and sisters, maintaining our church’s spiritual and relational vitality isn’t just my job, or the staff’s job, or the Ministry Council’s job. It’s the task of every member and friend of this church. We just can’t tolerate a negative atmosphere. If you see broken relationships between people in this church, you need to encourage them to work it out and get it fixed. Why such a big deal? Because failure to do so damages the witness of the church as a whole! Work it out. Shine it out. Here’s another aspect of spiritual maturity:

HOLD IT OUT.

Look with me at v. 14-15 again (NIV). “Do everything without complaining or arguing, so that you may become blameless and pure, children of God without fault in a crooked and depraved generation, in which you shine like stars in the universe”. Now add in v. 16 (NIV) “... as you hold out the word of life—in order that I may boast on the day of Christ that I did not run or labor for nothing.” Hold it out. What is the “it” we’re holding out? Well, Paul says it’s the word of life, doesn’t he? He means the whole message about Jesus - all that God has done to bring us to Himself. He means the story of the cross and the resurrection and how that changes everything for everyone potentially.

Some people – like Kim Brown in Thailand and Emerson and Ivy Wu who are preparing to go to Macau, China – are called to hold out the word of life to people overseas. Other people are called to hold out the word of life to a specific group of people like international students. That’s what our own Michelle Prindle here at OSU and the Trumbo family in North Carolina are doing now. It applies to every church. The Philippian church was called to hold out the word of life to lost people in Philippi. To whom is KRBC supposed to hold out the word of life? Well, I believe we can spread a pretty wide net, to be sure, but our primary focus or target should be the lost people living right here in Northland. That’s what I long to see – these pews filled up with men, women, boys and girls who live in Northland and who found Jesus as Savior because of the witness of this church.

But this also applies to everyone – to every single follower of Jesus. To whom are you holding out the word of life? Is it a family member... a close friend... a neighbor? And how are you holding out the word of life? Do you have a “holier-than-thou” attitude towards lost people? God can’t use that. Do you expect lost people to take the first step towards God? They won’t. God wants you to use you to take the first step towards them, because that’s the kind of God we have. Begin praying for lost people in your circle of influence. Look for opportunities to extend acts of love, care and concern. Practice hospitality. Invite them to a worship service, a Sunday Bible class, a small group meeting, a church event. As God permits, get into spiritual conversations with them. You want to talk about joy? My friend, there is no joy more wonderful than knowing God has used you in some way to help a lost person cross the line of faith and put his or her trust in Jesus Christ for this life and for all eternity. That’s JOY! Work it out. Shine it out. Hold it out. Let me mention a final mark of maturity:

POUR IT OUT.

There it is in v. 17-18 (NIV). “But even if I am being poured out like a drink offering on the sacrifice and service coming from your faith, I am glad and rejoice with all of you. So you too should be glad and rejoice with me.” Those words sound a little odd to us today because literal sacrifice isn’t a part of our relationship with God now. But Paul had come out of Judaism where literal

animal sacrifices were made at the Temple in Jerusalem to pay the debt for one's personal sins. There were other kinds of sacrifices or offerings as well – some of them involved different kinds of liquid or drink offerings – that were literally poured out upon the altar as an act of worship to God. Even pagan religions – some of which those Philippian Christians had come out of – had various literal sacrifices associated with them.

So, what's Paul's point in those verses? He's underlining the fact that suffering and sacrifice are a very real part of the Christian life. It touches on something he wrote a little earlier in his letter. "For you have been given not only the privilege of trusting in Christ but also the privilege of suffering for him. We are in this struggle together. You have seen my struggle in the past, and you know that I am still in the midst of it." (Ph 1:29-30 NLT) Paul was in prison chained to a Roman guard 24 hours a day. It cost him something to follow, love and serve Jesus. The Philippian Christians were starting to feel some significant, painful "push back" from their fellow citizens there in Philippi who didn't like the implication that this Jesus was Lord rather than Caesar. They were harassing, oppressing and picking on those followers of Jesus in a variety of ways. It was starting to cost the Philippian believers something to follow, love and serve Jesus.

Has it cost you anything yet to follow, love and serve Jesus? Yes, it is quite possible to face rejection by family and friends or face subtle persecution for following Jesus. But, we have largely escaped direct persecution in our country for being followers of Jesus. For many followers of Jesus in many other countries around the world today, it still costs to follow, love and serve Jesus. And perhaps one day we who live in America will be privileged – Paul's word, not mine – to suffer for Jesus, too. If that day should ever come for us, remember that Paul says here that there's a godly kind of joy that can only be found in that place of suffering. "... I am glad and rejoice with all of you. So you too should be glad and rejoice with me." (Ph 2:17-18 NLT)

Tim Winton is Australia's most celebrated novelist today. He's the author of more than a dozen bestselling books and winner of numerous literary prizes. Winton was recently interviewed on a popular television show and the conversation turned to Winton's well-known Christian faith. "I want to talk about faith," said the interviewer. "When you were, I think, about five, a stranger came into your family and affected your family quite profoundly. Is that right?" Tim Winton went on to tell the interviewer how his father, a policeman, had been in a terrible accident in the mid-1960s, knocked off his motorcycle by a drunk driver. After weeks in a coma he was allowed home. Winton said, "He was like an earlier version of my father.... He was sort of recognizable, but not really my dad, you know? Everything was busted up, and they put him in the chair, and said, 'Here's your dad.' I was horrified."

Winton's father was a big man and Mrs. Winton had great difficulty bathing him each day. There was nothing that Tim, five-years-old at the time, could do to

help. News of the family's situation got out into the local community, and shortly afterward, his mother got a knock at the door. "Oh, g'day. My name's Len," said a stranger to Mrs. Winton. "I heard your hubby's a bit ill. Anything I can do?" The man, Len Thomas, was from the local church. This man had heard about the family's difficulties and wanted to help. "He just showed up," Winton explained. "He used to carry my dad from bed and put him in the bath which in the 1960s in Australia in the suburbs was not the sort of thing you saw every day." According to Tim Winton that simple act of kindness from one, ordinary Christian man had a powerful effect: "It really touched me that a grown man, for nothing, showed up and washed a sick man—you know, it really affected me." This "strangely sacrificial act," as Tim Winton described it, was the doorway into the Christian faith for the entire Winton family.

Has it cost you anything yet to follow, love and serve Jesus? When it does, other people are somehow drawn to the Lord Jesus Christ by your sacrifice. When it does, you discover a wonderful kind of joy – God's kind of joy. God's Word for today: Work it out. Shine it out. Hold it out. Pour it out. All of those are aspects of spiritual maturity. And each of them leads you to joy.