

THE EVIDENCE OF JOY**GALATIANS 5:22-23**

Why is it that Christians can live so much of our lives joylessly? There's an old Dennis the Menace cartoon that goes like this. Mrs. Wilson hands a plate of cookies and a glass of cold milk to Dennis while Mr. Wilson, that long suffering soul, looks on with this usual sour expression. Dennis glances at Mr. Wilson and then says to Mrs. Wilson, "Mr. Wilson looks like he could use a good tickling!" Now, I want you to look around at who's here this morning. How many people do you see that could use a "good tickling"?

Last week I started a new message series entitled, "If You're Accused of Being a Christian, What Evidence Will Convict You"? Imagine living in a country where it's illegal to be a follower of Jesus. If you were arrested and accused of being a Christian, could a court of law find enough evidence to convict you? If so, what would count as evidence? Interestingly, the Bible answers that very question. The evidence that you are truly a child of God is called the fruit of the Holy Spirit. These are character traits and they're identified specifically in Galatians 5:22-23. Now, I'd like everyone to find that passage in your Bible, but I'd like to read those two verses in unison together today and every Sunday of this series. "But the Holy Spirit produces this kind of fruit in our lives: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. There is no law against these things!" (Gal 5:22-23 NLT)

The fact that you attend church is not evidence you're a Christian. Your knowledge of the Bible is not evidence you're a follower of Jesus. Your ability to sing or preach well is not evidence. I think of what Jesus said, "A good tree produces good fruit, and a bad tree produces bad fruit... Yes, just as you can identify a tree by its fruit, so you can identify people by their actions." (Matt. 7:17, 20 NLT) Character is what tells the true story. Character produced in you by the Holy Spirit supernaturally is the only real evidence. Today, I want you to think with me about joy. Did you think that joy was just something that you have or don't have – like a big nose or little ears? Not from God's perspective. Joy is a character issue. When joy is present, the Holy Spirit is living in and controlling you. When joy is absent, it indicates that either you're not a follower of Jesus or that something is seriously wrong in your relationship with Jesus. Let's begin....

JOY IS GIVEN AND GOTTEN.

Joy comes from God alone. You may not associate joy with God, but you ought to do so. What makes God joyful? Himself! God rejoices in all of His accomplishments. He takes delight in all He does. He's enthusiastic about everything He undertakes. He finds deep satisfaction in all of His plans and purposes. It brings God great joy to see you turn away from your sin and self-centeredness and receive His Son, Jesus, as your Lord and Savior. God Himself is the source of joy and the reason for joy. Without God there would be no joy. The Bible says, "You love him (Jesus) even though you have never seen him.

Though you do not see him now, you trust him; and you rejoice with a glorious, inexpressible joy.” (1 Pt. 1:8 NLT) To have Jesus is to have the Holy Spirit. To have the Holy Spirit is to have joy. Or as someone has put it, “Joy has us.”

Any person can be happy; only a follower of Jesus can have joy. I like the observation that happiness is an achievement that’s possible for any human being. Any person can have a happy marriage, a happy home, a happy job or career. If a person works hard at different areas of his or her life, many times he or she can carve out some well-deserved happiness. You don’t have to be a Christian to experience the happiness of making good grades in school, making a sports team or closing a business deal. By the same token, happiness is incredibly limited. It’s conditioned by and dependent on what’s happening to you at any given moment. Many times, happiness depends on things over which you have no real control. You don’t control other people’s behavior, choices or attitudes. Many times, you just fall into fortunate circumstances or you experience what we might call “good luck.” When things are going well for you, you’re happy. When things aren’t going so well, you’re unhappy.

Happiness is nice but limited. What do most people associate with happiness? First, positive relationships with other people close to you: spouses, kids, parents, people at work, people at school, and people at church. But people fail you, betray you, disappoint you, hurt you and the fact is that you can do the same to them! Second, people associate happiness with wealth or financial security. But no job is secure, no business is safe from failure and no savings or retirement account is risk free. Third, people associate happiness with good health and good looks. But disease can find its way into anyone’s body, your physical appearance will deteriorate and – last I heard – the mortality rate is still 100%! Fourth, people associate happiness with accomplishment, for example, success in your career or profession. But no matter how good you are at what you do, someone can do it better and someone else will be more successful. If you are at your best, how long will that last? And who really cares that you’re the best at something besides you?

Happiness and joy aren’t the same thing. Happiness is good, but it’s fleeting and limited. Joy comes only from finding God and then living with God in a certain way. And you don’t get joy by seeking joy. No, you only ever get joy by seeking and finding God. God gives joy not to those who pursue joy, but rather to those who pursue Him, seek Him and hunger and thirst for Him. Joy is always and forever something of God Himself and it is only given by God. Joy is feeling good about God and what He’s done; it’s not feeling good about yourself and your life. When you come into a relationship with God, you come face to face with truth, with integrity and with absolute honesty. You encounter Someone who loves you more than you love yourself and who is eternally committed to your welfare. He wants to forgive your sins and has prepared a place to spend eternity with you. He is always and forever faithful to you even though, yes, there will be times you will not understand the reasons behind what He allows to

happen to you in this life. He can be trusted. He brings ultimate meaning to your life. He invites you to invest your life in helping Him to achieve what has eternal significance and importance: His mission for this world.

Yes, it is possible to have joy internally even though it looks like everything is falling apart externally. The joy of the Holy Spirit is a divine dimension of living that doesn't depend on other people being nice to you, pleasant circumstances coming your way or successfully avoiding any and all painful events in life. Real followers of Jesus provide evidence of joy even in the midst of the worst circumstances in life. They can even go through terrible times of suffering, loss, heartache and tragedy but still possess joy because God is still there. Nothing has separated you from God's love. All that truly matters, remains. There's a remarkable passage in the Bible that reads like this: "Even though the fig trees have no blossoms, and there are no grapes on the vines; even though the olive crop fails, and the fields lie empty and barren; even though the flocks die in the fields, and the cattle barns are empty, (in other words, absolute financial disaster) yet I will rejoice in the LORD! I will be joyful in the God of my salvation! (Hab. 3:17-18 NLT) Lord, if I have You, I have all that really matters in this life or the next.

Billy Graham describes visiting the place in India where a great missionary by the name of Amy Carmichael lived for fifty years taking care of hundreds of girls who had been rescued from temple prostitution. For the last 20 years of Amy Carmichael's life she was bedridden during which time she wrote many books that ended up blessing millions of people. Joy so filled that sick room that everyone who visited her came away praising God. Billy Graham visited that sick room long after Amy Carmichael had died. He was asked to lead a prayer, but he says he was so overwhelmed by a sense of God's presence and joy at that very moment that he began to weep. Billy asked a companion to take over, but that man began to weep, too. In one her books, Amy Carmichael wrote, "Where the things of God are concerned, acceptance always means the happy choice of mind and heart of that which He appoints, because (for the present) it is His good and acceptable and perfect will."

Joy is given – given by the Holy Spirit alone to the follower of Jesus. You can't produce it, manufacture it or conjure it up on your own. But here's a bit of irony. It's also true that you can go out and get joy. Joy can be gotten. Joy is given to you when the Holy Spirit comes to live in your spirit. But joy is maintained and experienced on a daily basis by a decision of your will. By God's grace and through the power of the Holy Spirit, you can decide to be joyful. The Bible assumes this to be true. "Happy are those who hear the joyful call to worship, for they will walk in the light of your presence, LORD. They rejoice all day long in your wonderful reputation. They exult in your righteousness." (Ps 89:15-16 NLT) You can learn to be joyful in the Lord. Paul, the great apostle, was stuck in a Roman jail facing possible execution for the "crime" of sharing the message about Jesus when he wrote these words, "Whatever happens, my dear brothers

and sisters, rejoice in the Lord.... Always be full of joy in the Lord. I say it again—rejoice!” (Ph 3:1, 4:4 NLT) Joy is a choice and a decision.

Here are three implications. One, because joy can be gotten, you should get it here and now. You don't have to die and go to heaven to experience joy. You don't have to get every problem solved before you can have joy. How many of you have discovered that life is really a series of solving problems? As soon as you get one resolved, here comes another one! Life is a series of problems to be solved because it's God gym, so to speak, to get you in shape for eternity. If you have to wait for every relationship in life to be great, every circumstance in your life to be positive and every painful event successfully avoided to get joy, guess what? You won't get joy very often! By God's grace and through the power of the Holy Spirit, you can actually learn how to get and keep joy right in the midst of broken relationships, trying circumstances and painful events.

A second implication: if you can go out and get joy, you should be a joy to live with. If you're filled with joy, you will be a joy to live with. So are you – are you a joy to live with? How would your spouse answer that question? Your kids? Your parents? Your co-workers and friends at school? Your church buddies? “Rick, I just don't have a naturally joyful personality.” Guess what, no one does. But God does desire to work joy into you until it pours out of you like a kind of divine perspiration. If you're a child of God, you have every opportunity to go out and get joy and you have no good excuse not to. Joy is a choice that you make.

Joni Eareckson Tada was paralyzed from the neck down years ago as a teenager, but God has given her an amazing ministry as an author, a conference speaker and a champion for people with disabilities. She tells about a conversation she had with several women in the ladies' restroom during a break at a Christian women's conference. One woman, putting on her lipstick, said, “Oh, Joni, you always look so together, so happy even in your wheelchair. I wish I had your joy. How do you do it?” Joni instantly knew it was one of those moments when transparency was helpful and necessary. She said, “I don't do it. May I tell you honestly how I woke up this morning?... After my husband, Ken, leaves for work at 6:00 AM, I'm alone until I hear the front door open at 7:00 AM. That's when a friend arrives to get me up. While I listen to her make coffee, I pray, ‘Oh, Lord, my friend will soon give me a bath, get me dressed, sit me up in my chair, brush my hair and teeth and send me out the door. I don't have the strength to face this routine one more time. I have no resources. I don't have a smile to take into the day. But You do. May I have Yours? God, I need you desperately.’” One woman in that restroom asked, “So, what happened when your friend came through the bedroom door?” Joni answered, “I turned my head toward her and gave her a smile straight from heaven. It's not mine. It's God's. And so (and here she gestured toward her paralyzed legs) whatever joy you see today was hard won this morning.” Joy is a choice that you make.

A third implication. Because joy can be gotten, it ought to affect the way you worship God. Do you make a conscious choice to be joyful when you walk into this room on Sunday morning? If you enter this space with a Spirit-given attitude of joyful expectation (Wow, God is so wonderful and I have the privilege of worshipping Him today!), it helps to create a kind of spiritual energy that can transform a merely human gathering into a venue for the presence of God. I agree with those who say, “Rick, you don’t have to clap and raise your hands or shout ‘Amen’ to be joyful in worship.” What is curious is that many of those same folk will clap, wave their arms and shout all sorts of stuff at Buckeye games! Is reverence for God really the issue or could it be more about not wanting or not knowing how to approach God with a sense of joy? I believe that if more of us would pause before walking into this room on Sunday and say, “God, it’s a privilege to do what I’m about to do. Fill me with Your joy and with a holy expectancy,” it would transform our services! Because God is here, joy is given. But you have to reach out and take joy. You have to choose it to receive it.

JOY IS KILLED OR KEPT.

Living with unconfessed sin will kill your joy. Every follower of Jesus still sins from time to time. I wish it wasn’t true, but the Bible itself admits that reality. And when you sin, the joy of the Holy Spirit begins to dry up within you. And when you refuse to face that sin, confess it as wrong before God and turn away from it, you will start taking the first steps into what will become a joyless life. If you insist on being greedy, envious, materialistic, sexually immoral, selfish, unforgiving, deceitful – or whatever else the Bible identifies as sin – you will give up any joy. And if you excuse your sin, rationalize your sin, justify your sin or in some way just tolerate your sin, you will lose your joy. It won’t come back until you repent.

By the same token, living in obedience to what Jesus says will keep your joy. Jesus is the One who made the connection between joy and doing what He says. “When you obey my commandments, you remain in my love, just as I obey my Father’s commandments and remain in his love. I have told you these things so that you will be filled with my joy. Yes, your joy will overflow!” (John 15:10-11 NLT) When you choose to do the right thing at work instead of what’s expedient or convenient – you might well suffer a loss for doing it -, but you will have the joy of the Holy Spirit. When you choose to thank God for what He’s given to you rather than complaining that you don’t have as much as your neighbor, you will have the joy of the Holy Spirit. When you wait until marriage to have sex, you will have the joy of the Holy Spirit. When you choose to tell the truth even though a lie might provide a moment of relief, you will have the joy of the Holy Spirit. Unconfessed sin is a joy killer. Living in obedience is a joy keeper.

Living with an unforgiving, bitter spirit will kill your joy. Nothing destroys joy quicker than what the Bible calls a “root of bitterness” that springs up and chokes the life out of your joy. Why is forgiveness such hard work? When you choose to forgive, it can feel like what was done to you wasn’t so bad after all. There are

lots of excuses to nurse and hold on to bitterness, but the fact remains that you can't have the joy of the Holy Spirit and a bitter, resentful heart all at the same time. By the same token, releasing resentment to God will keep your joy. Release the person who offended you from your prison of resentment. Get yourself out of that same prison, too. Yield those powerful feelings to God so that He can break their dominance of your thoughts, your attitudes and your life. On several occasions, I've gone through a period of joylessness and discovered that the reason was bitterness and resentment towards someone. I've wanted to hold on to it, nurse it and justify it. God says, "Fine. But until you surrender that resentment to Me, you'll not have My joy." An unforgiving spirit is a joy killer. Releasing resentment to the Holy Spirit is a joy keeper.

Living in the past or the future instead of living fully in the present will kill your joy. Some of us here today have had a very difficult past. It's filled with regrets, shame, guilt and unresolved issues. You can't undo the past. You can only let God forgive and heal it. If you don't allow the Holy Spirit to heal the hurts in your past, you will kill off the joy of the Holy Spirit. On the other hand, it's possible to live so much in the future that you forget to enjoy the present fully. Guys, we're especially susceptible to this temptation. You can work so hard and try so hard to be a success for the future that you neglect and miss the joy of the present: a wife who loves you and needs your attention, precious children growing up faster than you can imagine, rich friendships, and the privilege of serving the Lord through His church in meaningful ways. You can get so wrapped up in what may happen in the future that you can't enjoy what is happening in the present.

By the same token, when you live fully in the present by committing both your past and your future to God in faith, you can keep your joy. If your past is full of regret, then let it become a constant reminder of God's grace, love and forgiveness. As to the future, realize that God is already there; therefore, there's nothing to fear about tomorrow. No need to live an anxious, care-filled life because God is in control of tomorrow as much as He is today. He assures me that whatever may happen, nothing will ever be able to separate me from His love. Living in the past or in the future instead of in the present is a joy killer. Living fully in the present while committing your past and your future to the Lord is a joy keeper.

Mark Twain, the great American author, had a very bad habit of spicing his conversation with lots of profanity. Twain's wife was a delicate, refined woman. She would get very upset by his rough language. She tried in many ways to cure him of his habit – always unsuccessfully. On one occasion, she tried a shock technique. When Twain returned home from a trip, he was greeted at the door with a string of profanity from his wife. From the lips of this delicate, refined woman, he heard every bad thing he had ever said and more. Twain just stood there quietly and listened until she finished. Then he looked at her and said, "My dear, you have the words, but not the music."

When it comes to the joy of the Holy Spirit, we sometimes know the words but not the music. There is a place in you and me that can only be touched by God – a place that is wild, sweet, filled with laughter, freedom and a reaching out to embrace the whole, wide world with something that nearly breaks the heart. It only comes when you encounter God – the God of all joy. The Bible says, “For the Kingdom of God is not a matter of what we eat or drink, but of living a life of goodness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit.” (Rom. 14:17 NLT)