

“Not Too Much to Bear”
Part 3 – JOY
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We are on week 3 of our summer sermon series, “Not Too Much to Bear.” The focus of this series as we have learned so far is what it looks like to bear the character of Christ, specifically the Fruit of the Spirit. Last week we learned that the Fruit of the Spirit is singular, not plural. There are not 9 different trees each producing one fruit, but there is only 1 tree producing fruit that can be described in 9 different ways. When we put our faith in Christ and are in him, then we have the fruit, but we need to allow God’s Spirit to grow and ripen the fruit within us. We need the Holy Spirit to fill us over and over and over again so that the fruit already inside of us can grow in all of its manifestations so that we can re-present Christ to the world. Today we are going to look at the second manifestation of the Spirit, joy. But first let’s pray: Father God, thank you for giving us your spirit so that we can bear the character of Christ to this generation. Help us to hear your word for us today. Help us to focus on you today and not the distractions this world throws at us. Open our hearts and minds as we prepare to receive the word this morning. May the meditations of our hearts and the words of my mouth be pleasing and acceptable to you. Amen.

What is the first image that comes to mind when you think of joy? Maybe it’s that feeling on Christmas morning when you were a child waking up to presents under the Christmas tree. You might think of getting proposed to or your wedding day, if you are married. You might think of your children or grandchildren when you take them to an amusement park or Disney for the first time. For me, next to the obvious of getting engaged this past Christmas, the picture of joy looks like the first time I got to ride an elephant in Thailand. Elephants are my favorite animals so to get to see one and interact with one up close was amazing. Then to ride one, just put me over the top. I remember sitting in the basket they have and the guide asked if we wanted to leave the safety of the basket and sit on the head of the elephant. Excitement and joy took over and I boldly moved toward the head. Now, I am also afraid of heights so it was both terrifying and exhilarating at the same time. I remember thinking to myself, “I’m going to fall off and die, but it doesn’t matter because at least I’ll die happy.” The excitement and joy that I had in that moment outweighed the fear and anxiety that I also had at the time.

Joy is more than happiness because happiness is momentary, fleeting. Joy is much deeper than that. Joy that the Spirit gives us helps us to step boldly and confidently forward no matter the circumstances. A lot of people today are pursuing happiness, what is going to make them feel better in a certain moment. If only I had this one thing then I would truly be happy. If only my spouse did this or that...If only I could go on that dream vacation...If only I had a different job or worked in a different environment. We chase after these things that would make us happy in a moment and we look for happiness in all the wrong places. The reality of the situation is that we can all experience true joy and that joy is found in Jesus Christ alone.

As disciples of Christ we have all been given an incredible reason to be joyful. We read it earlier in the service. Romans 5:8, *“But God demonstrates his love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.”* God loves us so much that he would send his son to die for us so that we can an abundant, joyful, eternal life. That we would no longer be separated from God. This reality should make us the happiest, most joyful people in the world, but sadly we are not always perceived that way.

Matt Brown, the author of one of the resources we are using for this series, uses the parable of the sower to give us a clearer picture of joy in our lives. He writes, “Jesus tells the story of a farmer sowing seeds. Sometimes the seed lands on the path and birds steal it away, by which Jesus meant that when some people hear the gospel, they don’t understand it – the enemy steals

away the message. Sometimes the seed lands on shallow soil. This represents those people who initially might have heard the gospel with great joy, but their faith is shallow, and the joy didn't last. These people didn't stay connected to the source, so their joy diminishes as they move away from Christ. Sometimes the seed grows up but soon is choked by weeds. This shows us what happens when our circumstances push us away from the joy we have in Jesus. He says that 'the worries of this life and the deceitfulness of wealth choke the word.' That is in my humble opinion, the most common challenge for believers today who are struggling with joy. It's not that Jesus doesn't make us happy, but the worries and the concerns of life, the deceitfulness of things, pull us away from Christ; the deceitfulness of our own hearts causes us to walk off the path God wants for us; and all of this crowds out the happiness we have in Jesus. Finally, some seed lands on good soil. Some people hear the word of God, understand it, and it produces a bountiful harvest of good works throughout their lives, because of the great change Christ brings in their heart."

Which soil are you? Are you letting the worries and concerns of this world choke out the joy God has given you? It's hard. We all struggle with joy at some point in our lives, but we need to understand what is stealing our joy from us and how to walk in the joy that Christ has promised us. This may come easier to some than to others. Some of the manifestations of the fruit will come easier than others to you, but that doesn't mean we give up on the difficult ones. We press forward and ask God to help us grow those fruit that do not come naturally to us.

So, what is stealing our joy today? Today I want to share with you three obstacles I perceive that steal our joy today, no matter what age or stage you are in life. Starting with number 1, comparison is the thief of joy. And in this technological age it is easier and easier to compare ourselves and our lives to others. As a millennial who uses social media quite often, social media can be very beneficial to keep in touch and communicate with other people who live far away in an instant. It can also be very harmful in that whether we know it or not, when on social media we are constantly comparing our lives to the lives of others. We get a "the grass is greener mentality" on social media. On social media and in media in general, we see stories of people doing incredible things. People are going on the perfect vacation with the perfect family. People just bought a beautiful new house. It makes it so easy to compare what we perceive of our own lives with what other people are curating of their lives. For on social media, we are comparing the highlights other people have filtered and curated for the public against the bloopers/reality of our own lives. The rise of Facebook usage and social media has actually been linked to depression and unhappiness in the lives of teenagers and young people today.

In the book *iGen: Why Today's Super-Connected Kids are Growing Up Less Rebellious, More Tolerant, Less Happy- and Completely Unprepared for Adulthood – and What that Means for the Rest of US*, author and researcher Jean Twenge shares data and research done around the country about social media usage and today's young people. She shares three different studies in which social media usage (screen time) is correlated to unhappiness and depression. In all three studies, those who spent more time on social media (particularly Facebook, which was more popular with college students during the study) were more likely to report being unhappy than those who interacted with people face to face or used Facebook less. One study "randomly assigned Danish adults to stop using Facebook for a week or to continue to use Facebook as usual. At the end of the week, those who had taken a break from Facebook were happier, less lonely, and less depressed than those who had used Facebook as usual...Because the participants were randomly assigned to conditions, that rules out the explanation that people who are already unhappy, lonely, or depressed use Facebook more – as a true experiment, it shows that Facebook use causes unhappiness, loneliness, and depression." I'm not saying that all Facebook use is bad, but we need to guard our hearts and limit the time we are allowing our human nature to compare our lives to others.

The second common thief of our joy is the busyness and stress we have in our lives. It is hard to experience joy in our lives when we run ourselves ragged, not getting the rest we need. While God wants us to do our best and work for his glory in every situation, I don't think that

means working ourselves into a nervous breakdown. The more stressed we are the less likely we are to show grace and joy to ourselves or to others. Think about your attitude and your mood when you are stressed, busy, or, running late. The more stressed we are the more irritated we are, the more we find fault in ourselves or others, and the less joyful we are. The busyness of our lives can hinder the joy and gratitude we feel. God created us with a need to find rhythms of rest that will refill us for the work he has for us to do. We cannot experience maximum joy in our lives if we do not learn to trust God and slow down.

Hardships, worries, and concerns can also hinder the joy we have. When life does not always go how we planned, how do we respond? Most of the time, not well. We can let the most trivial problem irritate us and gnaw at us the rest of the day. More serious problems and hardships can easily throw us into a spiral. How can we talk about having joy when there are so many people we know and love going through cancer treatments? How can we be joyful when there are so many people hurting around the world? Natural disasters abound, war and violence seem to be increasing, the world seems to be going farther and farther from God. How can I have joy in my life, when my life seems to be falling apart? These are the weeds that are choking out the joy that God has given us. We focus all of our attention on the problems we have and very little attention to the sovereign God.

This is the common denominator in all of these obstacles. Comparison, busyness/stress, and hardships can draw us away from Christ and his promises and plans for our lives. Comparing ourselves to others can lead us to make choices that do not honor God or we may seek comfort in something other than God. Fear, anxiety, and hardships can draw our focus off of Christ and our hope we have can be choked out. The busyness and stress of our lives may hinder us from connecting with the Lord in his word and connecting in the community he has placed us in. All of these things can disconnect us from the source of our joy.

Remember what Jesus told his disciples when he ate with them for the final time before his death. John 15: 1-8, *"I am the true vine, and my Father is the gardener. He cuts off every branch in me that bears no fruit, while every branch that does bear fruit he prunes so that it will be even more fruitful. You are already clean because of the word I have spoken to you. Remain in me, as I also remain in you. No branch can bear fruit by itself; it must remain in the vine. Neither can you bear fruit unless you remain in me. I am the vine; you are the branches. If you remain in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing. If you do not remain in me, you are like a branch that is thrown away and withers; such branches are picked up, thrown into the fire and burned. If you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. This is to my Father's glory, that you bear much fruit, showing yourselves to be my disciples."* When we are connected to Jesus, we are more apt for joy because we can see this life through an eternal perspective not a worldly perspective. Jesus gives us an eternal hope and joy that cannot be taken away no matter what circumstances we find ourselves in.

And he set the example of what it looks like to have an eternal perspective. The author of Hebrews talks about endurance in Hebrews 12. *"Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that easily entangles. And let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us, fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of our faith. For the joy, set before him he endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. Consider him who endured such opposition from sinners, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart."* Three words... *"for the joy."* Why did Jesus go through such a gruesome and extremely painful kind of death? Because he had an eternal perspective of *"bringing many sons and daughters to glory"* (Hebrews 2:10). For the joy that would take place in heaven when multitudes would be praising and glorifying God. For the joy of seeing all of us, you, come to faith. That is why Jesus came, lived, died, and rose again! As disciples, joy should be a motivating factor in loving and discipling others. The joy that will be shared in our heavenly home! I, for one, cannot wait to celebrate and worship with those who have gone before me and with the angels!

Our joy, however, is not limited to joy in heaven. We are meant to be joyful during our time on earth. Read with me again what Paul wrote in Philippians, *“Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice!”* This was a man who was writing from a prison, not knowing his fate as he waited in Rome. This from a man who was left for dead and beaten several times throughout his ministry. He is telling us to rejoice in the Lord, always. Do not rejoice only when things are going well for you. Do not rejoice only on the sunny days. But rejoice in the Lord always, in all circumstances of our life. For what will have a better influence on those around. It is easy to be joyful when life is going well, atheists and non-Christians do that. But to rejoice and hold fast to the joy and promises of God when things are not going well, that speaks to people. That ministers to people and stays with them. Being joyful in hard times is something others won't be able to stop thinking about. *“Why are they joyful when things around them are falling apart?”*

We can remain joyful in all circumstances because our joy is not based on momentary, earthly things, but our joy is based on the steadfastness of the Lord, who will not leave us or abandon us. Our trust is in God and our joy is based on the eternal perspective that God has already given us everything we have ever needed in Jesus Christ. Through hardships and troubles, we have an eternal hope and joy that cannot be taken away from us.

If you find yourself in a season where joy is hard to come by maybe you need to draw closer to the Lord. Dig deep in his word and be intentional about spending time with him and spending time with other believers. It can be very easy to stay in an unjoyful attitude when you are isolated and by yourself. Guard your hearts and your margin. Take time to slow down and celebrate life. Start a gratitude journal, keeping track and thanking God for all the things He has given you. Maybe you need to Marie Kondo your life. Marie Kondo has a show on Netflix where she helps people declutter their homes by asking this simple question, *“does it spark joy?”* If it doesn't spark joy in your life or depletes you more than other things, maybe you need to rethink how much time you invest in it or cut ties. This is not good in all situations because as Neil Barringham said, *“The grass is green where you water it.”* Some areas of our lives need to be cut, some pruned back, and some watered. Above all else, stay connected to the source of all joy – God. Ask God for a renewed joy in your life. Ask him to help you recognize the obstacles of joy and your own life and follow His direction for cutting pruning and watering.

God wants us to be happy and be joyful. This doesn't mean that it will be always easy, but remember from Lent what James wrote to the early believers. *“Consider it pure joy, my brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith produces perseverance. Let perseverance finish its work so that you may be mature, complete, not lacking anything.”* As disciples, God calls us to grow and mature in our faith. He wants the fruit of joy in our lives to be well-ripened so that we can influence and re-present Christ to a world that desperately needs him. The world needs more love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. We have it, let's go disperse it wherever we go.

Heavenly Father, thank you for giving us an eternal perspective so that we can be joyful in all circumstances. We can remain joyful in life because all you have done for us. We put our trust in you and build the foundation of our joy on the Rock of our Salvation, Jesus. Help us to guard our hearts and to guard our joy. When we start to feel less joyful, help us to remember to lean unto you. Help us to dispense joy in you wherever we go and with whomever we encounter. We seek to re-present Christ to this world. Help the fruit you have given us to grow and mature as we build our lives on you. Thank you, Lord. Amen.