

9:30am Sunday 5th June – JOY

Do you have real Christian joy? Or are you a bit lacking today? The problem is of course that the fruit of the Spirit as described in Galatians 5 are all supposed to come together. It isn't the case that we can pick and choose. You have love, but I have peace. The fruit of the Spirit isn't a giant smorgasbord where we can take what we fancy - all Christians should exhibit them all the fruit in greater measure as they grow more like Jesus.

And it is a **should**... These are the things that the Spirit will grow in Christians as they mature and grow in their faith, and that includes exhibiting Christian joy. This all means of course that if that is not the case then there is something wrong somewhere.

Sadly though, whilst most people would describe Christians as kind and friendly and generous, I'm not sure the world at large necessarily thinks of Christians as joyful. In fact, some Christians are often downright miserable! Sometimes you visit churches and the atmosphere is so dark and gloomy you feel there would be more joy in the graveyard than amongst living Christians.

But to be a Christian is to be joyful! The scriptures command us to rejoice in the Lord always and tell us that since this is the day that the Lord has made, we should rejoice and be glad in it. That's why one writer has gone as far as saying that for a Christian to be generally gloomy is 'practical atheism' – and surely he's got a point. As Christians we are living after Jesus' death and resurrection, after his ascension and after the coming of the Spirit at Pentecost; and that means that we have the assurance of God's amazing love for us, the certainty of sins forgiven, the presence of the Holy Spirit with us always and the guarantee of eternal life. What's more we know that the God who made the world and who made us is our Father; that Jesus who died and rose again for us is our brother and that the Spirit of Jesus is our comforter. And if we bring those things to mind I have to ask how can we **not** be joyful? How can we be gloomy? But that is often how we are, isn't it?

But rather than making us feel worse I want to be very practical this morning and look at 2 things: What makes us gloomy? And how can we throw off the gloom? But before I do, let me clear up 3 misconceptions:

1: Being joyful isn't about being happy.

Lots of things make us happy, from chocolate to a win for your favourite team to a lovely sunset. But whilst happiness is good, it is very fickle. The chocolate runs out or gives you spots; your team lose the next game; the sunset fades and the rain comes. Happiness fades as quickly as it comes but joy lasts.

2: Joy goes much deeper than happiness.

Real joy is about having an underlying contentment or orientation towards happiness. You don't always like your family: sometimes they annoy you or frustrate you but deep down being with them is a positive experience. Watching sport, despite the pain of defeat, is always a pleasure. The beauty of the world in nature, despite its brutality or fleeting nature makes your heart sing. That's joy.

3: Joy and tears can go together.

So I won't always feel like singing when my team lose but there is still joy in the game. I won't always catch the sunrise just right but knowing it is there will lift my spirit when I think of it. I might be mourning the loss of a loved one but my heart will still have joy because I knew them in the first place. Joy remembers

the happiness that was past and savours it again and again but does so whilst always looking forward to the next taste because the joyful person knows there will be more.

And if you think that's a pipe dream then let me remind you what Paul wrote of Jesus: who for the joy set before him endured the cross. Despite the anguish, and the suffering Jesus knew that whilst weeping may last for a night joy cometh in the morning- and so there was joy even in the suffering. Delayed joy yes, but joy in the obedience and the anticipation of what was to come.

So that was Jesus, but what about us? What makes us gloomy? 3 things

SIN: I want you to imagine the scene: it's a beautiful summer's day, your sunglasses are on and you're in your Aston Martin sports car with the top down and the stereo is blasting out your favourite tunes as you cruise around the English countryside. What could be more perfect than that? The sun is shining, the music is loud, and the car is cornering like it's on rails when all of a sudden you hear a noise that is even louder than your stereo.

You glance into your rear view mirror and there behind you is a police car, lights flashing, commanding you to stop. So you pull over and when the police officer gets out you start to moan.

Why did you pull me over? I was having such a great time. The sun is shining, my sunglasses are on, the music is perfect and the car is cornering like it's on rails. Officer, you have ruined my joy!

Well what does the officer say? Does he apologise? No he says, "I haven't ruined it, you did by driving over the speed limit and endangering other motorists as you zoomed along the road." Then he hands over a ticket and a fun is well and truly ended.

Was it the officer's fault? No! It's yours. You broke the law, you sinned, and now there are consequences.

In the same way, right throughout the Bible we see a clear link both between obedience to God and enjoying God's joy, and between disobedience to God and a lack of joy.

Now sometime that comes out in the consequences of sin: I gamble and end up homeless; I lose my temper and end up in jail; but often we lose our joy because our sin distances us from God. Sin puts a barrier between us and our holy God so we no longer enjoy his presence and the joy that brings. In Psalm 32 King David said that his sin even caused him to waste away and groan and lose his strength because it separated him from the Lord of life. And very often our own sin robs us of our joy because it puts a barrier up between us and God.

MISPLACED CONFIDENCE: Two weeks ago I visited an exhibition showing the plans for the new stadium for Luton Town. It's a brilliant design for the middle of the town centre and will hold 20,000+ people with every one of them getting a great view. Well, I looked at these plans and they were beautiful, and I came out smiling from ear to ear. If everything goes to plan, in four years time I will be there with thousands of others cheering on the mighty Hatters!

But here's the thing. While the football team and the new stadium and perhaps a better squad of players might make me happy and give me a better experience, if I'm after a deep joy that truly lasts then I'm going to be very disappointed. Luton Town simply cannot deliver.

And I could say the same about a new car, because eventually they break down or rust or get stolen; or about a new house, because although a home provides shelter and security, it doesn't give me love. In fact

even our closest relationships with our husbands and wives or children are not designed to satisfy us in the way that God can. Eventually they, or we, will die; and in the meantime we often fall out or have disagreements or we let each other down.

You see whilst created things can bring us some happiness and even a measure of joy, to place all our hopes in them is utter foolishness. They simply cannot deliver the joy we most long for. And so when a good thing, becomes a God thing, when it becomes the thing on which our joy depends, we end up being gloomy and disappointed because those things are not strong enough to take the weight of our expectations.

And if our spiritual confidence is misplaced, that will lead to gloom as well. When the Galatian church was formed they had great joy because they knew that Jesus had paid for their sin and given them free and full forgiveness by his grace. But a few years later, some people came along and convinced them that for God to accept them then as well as believing in Jesus they needed to keep all of God's laws. And as hard as they tried, they couldn't do it! No wonder when Paul wrote to them to correct their thinking he asked them this question: "*What has happened to all your joy?*"

And like them if our spiritual confidence is based on ourselves and on our good works to earn God's forgiveness, then we are always going to be gloomy because we can never meet God's standard. Misplaced confidence, either in things or in our own spiritual performance, will always lead to gloom.

Here's the third thing that makes us gloomy.

CIRCUMSTANCES: very often it's the things that happen in life which makes us gloomy. They can be times of pain or illness, times of loss or grief, times of persecution, times even when our faith is really put to the test.

Now of course the Bible says that we should expect those things. Jesus said that in this world we will have trouble, and that's right isn't it. None of us have a trouble-free life. And what makes it worse is that very often we can't see any reason why these things are happening to us; occasionally we know it's because we have been disobedient and we are reaping what we have sown, but very often it isn't like that.

You're minding your own business when a drunk driver smashes into the side of your car and lands you in hospital for three months. Your sister has never smoked a cigarette in her life and all of a sudden she has lung cancer. You've been a loyal and productive employee for many years but the company has gone into administration and now you are out of work. When circumstances like that arise we are not going to be happy about them. These things cause us pain and grief and worry, and we are never going to enjoy them, but so often those things also rob us of our joy in the Lord and leave us gloomy.

So how can we throw off the gloom? How can we have the joy of the Lord and hold on to the joy of the Lord even in the midst of even the most trying of circumstances? Here are the antidotes. Are you ready?

SIN: Firstly, if our gloom and heaviness of heart is because we have sinned and disobeyed God, and our guilt has taken us away from God's wonderful presence, then we need to confess our sin and seek his forgiveness. Now, that's not rocket science is it?

When you have an argument with someone and fall out and the relationship goes cold what you need to do? You need to say sorry and ask for their forgiveness. And when they forgive you your relationship is restored and there is closeness and love again.

And it's exactly the same with God. In Psalm 32, David was deeply gloomy, so much so that his health was suffering. In the Psalm David talks about his bones wasting away and that he had no joy, no peace and no strength in his body. And he remained like this until he came to God with his confession and found that God always gives his forgiveness no matter what we have done. And when he did, his relationship with God was restored and his joy returned.

If you have no joy in your relationship with God; if he feels miles away because you have wandered off the path of obedience; then the answer is to come back to him. Admit your sin, say sorry and ask for his forgiveness and he will give it.

If our gloom is because of sinfulness and disobedience, the antidote is confession and repentance.

What about if our gloom is really caused by our **MISPLACED CONFIDENCE**? What do we do then? Very simply, if we are gloomy because of misplaced confidence we need to put our trust firmly in God and his great truth.

If I have a choice between two boats to take me from England to France and one of them is a wooden dinghy with a torn sail, an unreliable crew and a hull full of holes, whilst the other is a brand-new ferry with a respected captain, it's not hard to work out which one I'm going to choose. Now of course sometimes it doesn't look like we're getting into a wreck of a boat when we place our confidence in things other than God; these days marketing departments can make anything look glamorous and glitzy and salesmen can sell anything at any price and still make us feel we've got a bargain. But ultimately only God is perfectly reliable. Ultimately only God delivers what he promises.

So if your gloom is caused by placing your hopes and confidence in things that cannot truly satisfy, then turn your gaze again to God and fix your eyes and your hopes on him. Remember who he is: bring to mind his power, his might, his faithfulness, his goodness. Remember what he has done for you on the cross and rejoice in his mercy and the salvation that is yours through faith in Jesus. And bring to mind his promises for your future both in this life where his purposes never fail and the next life when we see the Lord in all his glory. Read God's word; believe what you read and draw near to God because he is faithful and in his presence is fullness of joy for evermore.

Have you done that? Are you doing it now? Or are you trying to find satisfaction in things that cannot satisfy and will not bring you joy? There are many wells in this world which promise us the water of life, but only Jesus delivers. Put your confidence there and you will not be disappointed.

Here's the last one? How do we find joy no matter what our **CIRCUMSTANCES**? How can we throw off our gloom even when we are suffering when everything seems to be going wrong?

Quite simply, we need to change the way we think and what we focus on so that our circumstances do not cause us to take our eyes off Jesus. So let me give you three things to remember and bring to mind in those times:

Firstly, we need to remember the character and authority of God; that God is good and faithful and in control. In the middle of our trials, it isn't important for us to know why things are happening to us, however much we would like to know the details. What's important is not that **we** know why things happen, but that we know **the one** who knows why things are happening to us. Whatever our circumstances, we need to remember that God is good and faithful and in control.

Secondly, we need to remember that God's purposes for us are good. Romans 8:28 *"and we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, those who had been called according to his purpose."* Sometimes God allows us to suffer to discipline us for our sin or sinful attitudes. Sometimes God allows us to suffer to train us and strengthen our faith. But whatever the reason, we have the promise of God that he will use that situation for our good so we never ever suffer in vain.

This is about taking the long view of life isn't it. If today is all-important, if what happens now is of the greatest value to us, then difficult circumstances will always rob us of our joy. But if our eyes are set on glory; if our greatest hope is in the promises of God that are yet to come, then the confidence that God will use all circumstances for our good will bring us great comfort and joy even in the midst of those circumstances.

Thirdly, we need to remember the glorious blessings that are already ours in Christ and not allow things to get out of perspective.

Two years ago I had my brand new iPhone stolen while we were on holiday in France. For a few hours I was focused on my missing phone and how angry I was. But at some point I stopped and realised that my anger and frustration were robbing me of the joy of being on holiday with Judy in a beautiful place, and more than that, they were actually robbing me of my fellowship and joy in the Lord. But when I remembered those things, things that were far more important than even my new iPhone, the importance of my circumstances went back into a proper perspective and my joy returned.

You see the more we glory in Jesus and the riches that are ours in Christ, the more our joy will prevail over gloom, irrespective of our circumstances.

I visited a lady two weeks ago and whose husband of many years died quite recently and whose failing health means she now has to live in a nursing home. She is also confined to a wheelchair: when I saw her one of her legs was heavily bandaged, and the other has had to be amputated. And yet, throughout our entire conversation the joy of the Lord shone through every pore in her body. How could she, suffering like that, overcome her circumstances to know and show the joy of the Lord?

It's because, like St Paul, she has learnt to think of her pain and suffering as no more than momentary struggles that pale into insignificance when she contemplates the character of God; the power of God and the glorious promises of God for this life and the next.

And if we know those things, then we too can rejoice in the Lord always, no matter what our circumstances. If we know those things then we too can throw off our gloom and know the joy of the Lord as our strength as a day to day experience. And if we know those things, then we too can know the inexpressible and glorious joy being a child of God brings.

Wouldn't you love to be around people like that all the time? Wouldn't you want to know why they are like that? And wouldn't you want to be like them?

Holy joy like that is infectious. May God fill us with his Spirit and draw us closer to the Lord and keep us trusting in his goodness and might whatever life brings. And as He does, may his joy overflow into us and change us so that others might come to know our joy-bringing God for themselves. Amen.