

Joy-Part I

Isaiah 2:1-5
Psalm 122
Romans 13:11-14
Matthew 24:37-44

Not all happiness is the same. Imagine that you're driving down Rogers Avenue. It's been a busy morning, but you have about 30 minutes before people are expecting you to be somewhere. As you near Sweetbay Coffee, you realize that you have time to get a large cappuccino, which will taste delightful on the brisk, rainy morning. Do you pull into Sweetbay and get the coffee? If so, *why?* Most of us never ask the question, "Why?" We do many things every day that bring us the psychological contentment that we call "happiness," but we don't know why.

Last September, I shared with you the lesson God has been teaching me about idols. For more than seven years, God had slowly and lovingly weeded things from my life that I frequently turned to for happiness; I had made idols out of them. A couple of months ago, it seemed like God was changing the lesson. God seemed to be telling me that His lesson wasn't about removing things from my life, but rather, it was about learning to appropriately *appreciate* His creation, not making it into an idol. He wanted me to experience authentic JOY, rather than looking for empty pleasure or consolation.

To be honest, I was, and am, a little nervous about the idea. I wanted to make sure that I wasn't simply calling my own rationalization "God's will" and fall back into the same habits of making idols out of His creation, especially regarding hobbies and interests. Therefore, before I "accepted" God's invitation to reintroduce some hobbies into my life, I asked Him to teach me about joy. I wanted to know how to find JOY in created things, not merely a happiness that was rooted in pleasure or consolation.

I studied joy for two months. I meditated on more than two hundred Scripture references to joy. This Advent, I am going to share with you what I learned. We will mainly look at the differences between happiness as pleasure, consolation, and joy. And, we will look at what the Bible says about joy and where to find it.

Pleasure, consolation and joy can all be described and oversimplified as happiness, feeling good, or contentment. However, there are significant differences between them. By definition, pleasure has to do with *tangible gratification*, which is pursued as a "reward" or "recompense." Consolation, however, is sought after in order to cover up an existing "bad" feeling. Joy is different from both of these because, by its very definition, it involves *union* or *relationship*.¹

A great way to understand whether our pursuit of happiness is rooted in a desire for pleasure, consolation, or joy is to understand our motive. When our pursuit of happiness is pleasure based, we consciously or unconsciously feel like we have earned the right to be happy or that we deserve it. For example, we might swing into Sweetbay and get a cappuccino because we've had a difficult morning and we feel we *deserve* the happiness a cappuccino will bring. Or, maybe we've already worked really hard and the cappuccino is a *reward* for our hard work. This

¹ The Merriam-Webster Dictionary defines joy as: "the emotion evoked by well-being, success, or good fortune or by the prospect of possessing what one desires." "Possessing what one desires" is the language of union and relationship.

is a common motivation for indulging in adult beverages after work or even various addictions. We can know that our desire for pleasure is our motivation if we hear the voice in our head saying things like, “You deserve it,” or “You’ve earned it.”

Pleasure is not a bad thing, in and of itself. However, selfishness is the danger in letting pleasure be our motivation for happiness. Humility can keep us from the danger of selfishness. Jesus describes the humility necessary to not fall into the trappings that can be involved in pleasure when He said, “When you have done all you have been commanded, say, ‘We are unprofitable servants; we have done what we were obliged to do’” (Luke 17:10b). Notice how such humility does not leave room for a sense of entitlement inherent in seeking pleasure.

Whereas we seek *pleasure* when we feel like we’ve *earned it or deserve it*, we seek *consolation* when we feel like we *need it*, due to some deficiency in our lives—like grief, sadness, the loss of something important, problems, conflicts, loneliness, or emptiness. Let’s apply this to our trip to Sweetbay Coffee. If the reason we want a large cappuccino is because we’re sad, then the cappuccino can be labeled as a consolation. It is filling an emptiness in our lives.

Most of us never take the time to scrutinize our motives, so we frequently fill ourselves with all sorts of things to find consolation. We might eat when we’re not hungry, drink when we’re not thirsty, watch television when there’s nothing worth watching, surf the internet, or thousands of other things. Whereas, humility and selflessness help to keep pleasure pure and holy, awareness and healing transform consolation. When we become aware of a deficiency in our lives, we should bring it to God for healing rather than trying to fill the void with God’s creation. In Jesus’ words, “Come to me, all you who labor and are burdened, and I will give you rest” (Matthew 11:28).

Like pleasure and consolation, joy is an experience of happiness and contentment. However, joy is more profound than pleasure or consolation. As I mentioned earlier, it is grounded in union and relationship. It involves our awareness of our motives and our desire for God’s creation to lead us in relationship with Him.

To go back to our example, we might find tremendous joy in a large cappuccino if we understand it to be something that God desired for us to have, as a small, but tangible reminder of His lavish love. While that might sound strange to some of us, it is an important spiritual principle that keeps our relationship with God at the forefront of our lives. In that union we are able to hear the truth of the words of Isaiah, “Sing out, O heavens, and rejoice, O earth, break forth into song, you mountains. For the LORD comforts his people and shows mercy to his afflicted” (Isaiah 49:13). This is more than happiness, pleasure, or consolation—it is an awareness of our union with God; it is joy.

Next week, we are going to look at what the Bible says about joy and where it says we can find it. Throughout this week, I encourage us to be more aware of our motives. When we look for happiness, let’s be aware of whether we are pursuing pleasure, consolation, or joy.

SUGGESTED PRAYER EXERCISES:

- ✚ Keep a journal throughout the week and make some notes each evening about what things throughout your day brought you happiness or contentment. Were they pleasure, consolation, or joy?