

INTRODUCTION

I begin with a question. What is the one quality of character that God and children enjoy in abundance but that most adults lack? The answer is "joy." The most striking difference between God and children on the one hand and most adults on the other is the joy they have.

Now, you might think that's not much cause for concern but it is. Nehemiah tells us why it is in Nehemiah 8:9-12. It's because the joy of the Lord is our strength and that's what I'm going to preach about today.

GLOOMY CHRISTIANS

In 445 BC, Nehemiah and thousands of exiled Jews went back to Jerusalem to rebuild its walls. It was a massive undertaking and they celebrated, after finishing it, by having an assembly. During that assembly, the scribe Ezra read portions of the Law of Moses to the people. But they didn't rejoice like they were supposed to when he did. According to verse 9, they wept instead. So Nehemiah tried to encourage them and declared in verse 10, *"the joy of the Lord is your strength."*

God's people 2400 years ago desperately needed to hear that and you know what? So do we.

I say that for a reason. Secular people often claim that Christians are too serious and the fact is that many are. They're too serious and here's why. Look at a key word in verses 9, 10, and 11, "holy." Holiness is one of the Bible's dominant themes. It teaches that God is holy and that we should be too. The problem is that a lot of Christians today connect holiness with gloominess. They've somehow gotten the idea that sanctified people are solemn people - that spiritual people are serious people. So, they've shut celebration and joy out of their lives.

I read a true story about a minister who was elected President of The London Baptist Association. One of the first things that he had to do in that capacity was get his picture taken. As he posed to do that, the photographer asked him what his profession was and he told him,

minister. The photographer then said, *"Please be solemn as I take the picture."* Puzzled, the minister asked *"Why?"* To which the photographer replied, *"Because I want your usual expression."*

Ministers are such serious guys aren't they? But it isn't just ministers in particular. It's Christians in general as well.

In his book A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man, James Joyce explains his hero's decision not to become a priest. He was afraid that his face would become like the faces of the religious people he knew: *"A mirthless mask reflecting a sunken day . . . sourfavored and devout, shot with pink tinges of suffocated anger."* There is some truth to that description. Many Christians do think that holy people are gloomy people and that's why they're always so stuffy, stodgy, and stiff.

JOYFUL CHRISTIANS

But they shouldn't be. Look again at the word "holy" in verses 9, 10, and 11 and the command that follows. Verse 9 – *"holy . . . do not mourn or weep."* Verse 10 – *"holy . . . do not be grieved."* And verse 11 – *"holy . . . do not be grieved."* Commentator Derek Kidner explains what that teaches us, *"Three times in this short paragraph it is pointed out that holiness and gloominess go ill together."* Or to say it another way, truly holy people aren't gloomy people.

What are they then? Verse 10 and the words *"the joy of the Lord"* tell us. They're joyful people. I wrote a note beside verse 10. It says, *"Holiness and joy are comrades."* The negative side is that holiness and gloominess go ill together. The positive side is that holiness and joy are comrades. They go well together. Holy people are joyful people.

There's a reason for that. It's because they're like God and God is joyful. The great G. K. Chesterton grasped that as well as anyone ever has. Listen to one of his most memorable passages in that regard: *"Because children have abounding vitality, because they are in spirit fierce and free, therefore they want things repeated and unchanged. They always say, 'Do it again'; and the grown-up*

person does it again until he is nearly dead. For grown-up people are not strong enough to exalt in monotony. But perhaps God is strong enough to exalt in monotony. It is possible that God says every morning, 'Do it again' to the sun; and every evening, 'Do it again to the moon. It may be that He has the eternal appetite of infancy; for we have sinned and grown old, and our Father is younger than we are." That is awesome and teaches us two things.

First, joy is God's basic character. As Chesterton said it, He has the appetite of infancy. That line makes me think of my grandson Malachi. Malachi's defining quality is joy. He experiences sheer and unadulterated joy more constantly than any child I've known. But as great as His joy is, it's less than a tiny fraction of God's. Joy is God's basic character. He is without doubt the most joyful being in the universe.

Second, if we're disciples of Jesus, joy is our destiny. It's our destiny in this life. John 15:11, for instance, teaches that we can have the fullness of Jesus' joy now. But it's also our destiny forever in the life to come. As C.S. Lewis said it, *"Joy is the serious business of heaven."* God intends that we have three defining qualities. One of those is joy! That is our destiny. God made us to be joyful.

JOY IS OUR STRENGTH

And we need to be. I mean that literally. Joy isn't a luxury item in our lives with God. It's a necessity. We need to be joyful and the last line in verse 10 reveals why - because the joy of the Lord is our strength.

Think about that line for a few seconds and what it teaches. Joy is strength. Joylessness is weakness. Both are true.

In C.S. Lewis' book The Screwtape Letters, a leader demon chastises an underling demon for allowing a Christian to enjoy things and explains why this way: *"The man who truly . . . enjoys any one thing in the world, for its own sake . . . is by that very fact forearmed against some of our subtlest modes of attack."*

What an insight that is! Joy is our strength. It is our first line of

defense against dysfunction, weakness, failure, and sin. It has the effect of weakening the power of temptation over us. It makes sin look not good to us. But its absence is weakness. Lack of it has the effect of strengthening the power of temptation over us. It makes sin look good to us. The bottom line is that joy strengthens us and lack of joy weakens us in our efforts to do what is right. It's as simple as that.

Do you realize what that means? No one is more vulnerable to the attacks of hell and of the flesh than joyless Christians. In contrast, no one is more invulnerable than joyful Christians. Joyless Christians are a demon's dream. Joyful Christians are a demon's nightmare. Be a demon's nightmare! Be joyful!

That's our call as disciples of Jesus and the good news is that we can answer it, by doing two things. Let's look at each of those.

LOOK TO THE GOODNESS OF GOD

First, we must look to the goodness of God! Notice that the joy in verse 10 is "of the Lord." We must look to God in order to find joy. When I say "look," I'm talking about an action of the mind. It's what we choose to think about – what we choose to focus our minds on.

Now, some people choose to think about things that destroy their joy. They look backward in their minds to their failures and sins. Or they look forward to the bad things that might happen to them. Or they look inward to their responsibilities, struggles, temptations, and deficiencies. Looking to any of those things is a recipe for joylessness!

So don't look to any of them. Look to God's goodness and greatness instead. Learn about and understand His goodness and greatness in detail. Then choose to fix your mind on them and what He will do in your lives. The Holy Spirit will empower you as you do and result is joy!

One of the ways of doing that is what John Ortberg calls "eschatological thinking." Eschatology is about final things. Thus, eschatological thinking means that we choose to view everything in light of our resurrection and the ultimate triumph of Jesus. Ortberg claims

claims that joy flows from that kind of thinking and he's right.

Take my brother-in-law James. I told you before that he was paralyzed last year at the age of 64. He now has a choice to make. Where will he place his mind? Will it be on his paralyzed body or His resurrection body? Which he chooses to look to will determine his joy.

I read about a bride who vomited as she came down the aisle during her wedding. There's no polite way of saying it. She threw up and it got on her father, two bridesmaids, the groom, and a ringbearer. At the reception afterward, though, she was as happy as could be. When a less than subtle guest asked her how she could be, she cheerfully replied with these words, *"I still got the groom."*

That same thing is true of us if we're disciples of Jesus. According to Revelation, no matter what's going on in our lives, heaven's bride still gets the groom in the end. We get Jesus and that's cause for joy!

LOOK TO THE GOODNESS OF LIFE

There's a second thing that we can do to be joyful people. Look to the goodness of life.

That's exactly what Nehemiah and the Jews are doing here. In verses 9, 10, 11, Nehemiah tells them that it's a holy day. So what should they do on that holy day? According to verse 10, it's to *"eat of the fat"* and *"drink of the sweet."* You won't find that verse in any Jenny Craig literature. Eat rich food and drink sweet beverages. I don't know about you but I don't have any problem at all with that command. It's like being told to eat Hostess Cup Cakes and drink chocolate milk. Nehemiah tells them and us, in other words, to look to and celebrate the good things in life. It's a holy thing that glorifies God when we do.

We once had a Bible school titled *Everyday's a Holyday with Jesus*. We spelled "holiday" h-o-l-y-d-a-y." We did that because the word "holiday" does actually come from the practice of "holy days." Holidays are holy days and everyday is a holiday. Every day, with all the good things that it offers to us, is a day of celebration and according to verse

12, that's what we should do. Celebrate! We do that by looking to the goodness of life. We exercise our ability to see and feel the goodness of even the simplest blessings that God gives us. We recognize and get from them all the pleasure and joy that He made them to give.

There's an old saying that helps us grasp the gist of that. It's *"Take time to smell the roses."* That means to focus on them and bring them as fully before our senses and mind as we possibly can. What we do with roses, we should do with all the good things in life - focus on them and bring them as fully before our senses and mind as we can.

Last week, Gloria Aeppli made me a batch of Toll House chocolate chip cookies with pecans. They're to die for but I do limit myself to 5 - 6 -7 at a time. So on Monday evening, I placed five on a little saucer and took them and a diet Dr. Pepper into the living room. I was disciplined enough not to make it my favorite drink, chocolate milk. Anyway, I didn't just eat those cookies. They're too good for that. I actually celebrated them. I focused on them and brought them as fully before my senses and mind as I could. I looked at them, smelled them, and slowly ate them, savoring each bite and thanking God as I did. I was just doing what verse 10 commands, *"Go, eat of the fat."*

Everyday life is full of so many good things like the sweetness of a peach or the delight of a clever metaphor or pun. Make everyday a holyday with Jesus, h-o-l-y-d-a-y. Look to all of those good things and celebrate them in conjunction with God. You be filled with joy if you do.

Those then are two things that disciples of Jesus can do to be joyful. Look to the goodness of God and look to the goodness of life.

CONCLUSION

I leave you in closing with this incentive to do that. There is a being in the universe who wants you to live without joy and it isn't God. It's Satan. As Francis de Sales pointed out, Satan is melancholy and sad (now and forever) and wants each of us to be as well. But don't be like Satan. Be like God instead. Be joyful. You'll be strong if you are.