Believe: The Virtue of Joy
John 15:11

As we continue on with our Believe series, we are examining the virtues of Jesus as those virtues that will eventually become part of our character as we follow Him. Last week we looked at the greatest of all virtues, agape love. This morning we will examine the often-elusive virtue of joy. In John 15:11 Jesus said, “I tell you all of this so that my joy may be in you, and your joy may be complete.” So, given that Jesus longs for us to experience His joy completely, I will unpack this virtue of joy under three subheadings: 1) the Christian understanding of joy; 2) the source of Christian joy; and 3) practices for increasing our joy.

I. The Christian Understanding of Joy
For most people, the words “joy” and “happiness” are synonymous. That is because our English language does little to differentiate these words from one another. In fact, when I “googled” the definition of joy, the result was this: “A feeling of great pleasure and happiness.” When I “googled” happiness, the definition was profound: “The state of being happy.” So, according to Google, joy is feeling happy. Happiness is being happy.

Now, even though happiness and joy are considered similar in that they are both emotional states and experiences of pleasure in our dictionary, for the Christian, happiness and joy are significantly different concepts. For the Christian, happiness is essentially what read earlier: a pleasurable or satisfying experience, a state of well-being and contentment. In other words, happiness comes about when things are going well.

I was in the locker room at my local gym earlier this week when a man came in. He immediately recognized another man who was getting dressed and asked how he was doing. He then said these words: “Well, the market is up…everything is good.” For that man, good news about the market meant that he was feeling happy. However, we can logically conclude that if the market was tanking, this fellow would be anything but happy, right? Happiness is dependent upon the current conditions that we are subject to. Good health, good food, our favorite team won the game, we have some extra cash in our pocket, or it finally gets above 50 degrees and we suddenly discover that we are feeling happy! Happiness is awesome, and we all wish we could FEEL happy all the time, right? But we know that’s not possible because our circumstances are constantly changing. Happiness is fleeting…it’s great while it lasts…but it’s fleeting.

When Jesus said, “I tell you these things so that my joy may be in you, and your joy may be complete,”… Jesus is clearly talking about something quite different from the fleeting emotion of happiness. Jesus is talking about JOY…His Joy.

To grasp the JOY of Jesus we must combine the words “contentment,” “confident,” “carefree,” and “celebration.” Here are some scriptural examples of the JOY that Jesus is referring to. In Philippians 4 Paul writes, “I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation…I can do all things through Him who gives me strength.” Jesus says in Matthew 6, “Why do you worry? Be anxious about nothing…”
Peter writes, “Humble yourselves, therefore, under God’s mighty hand, that he may lift you up in due time. Cast all your anxiety upon Him because He cares for you.” 1Peter 5:6

James writes, “Consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith produces perseverance.” James 1:2

For the Christian, joy is not contingent upon circumstances; it is a virtue, a condition that the believer enjoys in all circumstances that is rooted in who God is and who we are in Christ. The joy of Christ is a quiet confidence, it is the ability to rejoice and celebrate even in the most difficult circumstances. Jesus was unflappable under pressure; no one could steal His joy…and He offers His joy to us with intent of making our joy complete.

But where does such joy come from? If joy is not a feeling; and joy is not associated with how things are going, how are we to think of the source of joy? That leads me to my second subheading:

II. The Source of Christian Joy

Unlike happiness, joy is not based upon conditions; the joy of the LORD is based upon truth.

Let me give you some examples of biblical joy.

The Lord your God is in your midst,  
a mighty one who will save;  
he will rejoice over you with gladness;  
his love;  
he will exult over you with loud singing. Zephaniah 3:17

Because God is in our midst, we can have joy. The truth of His presence is the source of our joy.

This is the day that the Lord has made;  
let us rejoice and be glad in it. Psalm 118:24

Because God made the day, we can rejoice and be glad. The truth of God’s creative power is the source of our joy.

Though the fig tree should not blossom,  
nor fruit be on the vines,  
the produce of the olive fail  
and the fields yield no food,  
the flock be cut off from the fold  
and there be no herd in the stalls,  
yet I will rejoice in the Lord;  
I will take joy in the God of my salvation. Habakkuk 3:17-18

Our circumstances may be terrible…nothing is going right, but we can always find our joy in the truth that God is our Savior.
You make known to me the path of life;
in your presence there is fullness of joy;
at your right hand are pleasures forevermore. Psalm 16:11

Our joy and deepest pleasures come in knowing that God is present and sovereign. As long as that is true…and it is always true…our joy can remain unshakeable.

I will greatly rejoice in the Lord;
my soul shall exult in my God,
for he has clothed me with the garments of salvation;
he has covered me with the robe of righteousness,
as a bridegroom decks himself like a priest with a beautiful headdress,
and as a bride adorns herself with her jewels. Isaiah 61:10

Our joy is rooted in the fact, the truth, that God finds us to be desirable and beautiful, like a bride who is adored by the bridegroom. How do we know? The Bridegroom laid down His life for the Bride…to save us.

For the sake of Christ, then, I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities. For when I am weak, then I am strong. 2 Corinthians 12:10

Contentment can be found even in the midst of weakness, insults, hardships, persecutions and calamities because Jesus IS…because nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord (Romans 8).

Your testimonies are my heritage forever,
for they are the joy of my heart. Psalm 119:111

Our joy is found not in what I am doing or what I have accomplished or what has happened to me, but in what God is doing and what God has accomplished and in what happened to Him! My joy is not in my testimony, but my joy is rooted in His testimony. Such is why our joy as Christians is not fickle or fleeting. Our joy is rooted in the finished work of Jesus Christ on the cross and the power of the empty tomb.

I hope that you can see from these many scriptures that the biblical understanding of Joy is altogether different from the emotion of happiness, though we should not think that the joy of the Lord is void of happiness! On the contrary, since our joy is untouchable and our hope is secure, Christians can rejoice always in the Lord. Christians can and often do enjoy a great deal of happiness as a result of their joy.

Now…here’s the problem, and it’s a bit of an elephant in the room: we all know many “Christians” who are joyless and proud of it, right! In other words, they are chronically serious, constantly melancholy, and they generally communicate (intentionally or otherwise) that if you are not as miserable as they are, you are clearly not serious about your faith! Now, before you get offended, I actually count myself among those who can come across as a “joyless” Christian
from time to time. I am aware that my “countenance” is not always joyful. In fact, I have “resting grumpy face” because I have practiced being grumpy for a long time…I’m good at it. G. K. Chesterton once said that by the age of 50, we all get the face that we deserve! My face is a perfect example of that…some of you are showing off your grumpy faces even as I speak!

Listen: God is not grumpy. Joy is at the heart of God himself. If you were ever to be in God’s presence, you would discover that God is the happiest, most joyous presence in all of the universe! G. K. Chesterton once suggested that, in may respects, God is much more like a joy-filled child than us old, grumpy adults. Here is what he wrote:

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 exult in monotony. But perhaps God is strong enough to exult 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 not be automatic necessity that makes all daisies alike; it may be that God makes every daisy separately but has never got tired of making them. It may be that He has the eternal appetite of infancy, for we have sinned and grown old, and our Father is younger than us.

Grumpy joylessness within the Church is actually a very serious problem. Lewis Smedes writes, “To miss out on joy is to miss out on the reason for your existence.” C. S. Lewis once said, “Joy is the serious business of heaven.”

John Ortberg writes, “Joylessness is a serious sin, one that religious people are particularly prone to indulge in. It may be the sin most readily tolerated by the church. But how much damage has joyless Christians done to the cause of Christ?” Author Stephen Dedalus once described 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.”

I may have resting grumpy face, but I sure hope my face doesn’t fit that description! Church, Jesus longs for us to undergo a transformation that will lead us to acquire HIS JOY! A joy that is not grumpy, a joy that is not anxious, a joy that provides us a silent but strong confidence in all circumstances. It is the JOY of the New Man, of the one who now looks more and more like Jesus. Listen to how C. S. Lewis describes the New Man in Mere Christianity:

Already the new men are dotted here and there all over the earth. Some, as I have admitted, are still hardly recognizable; but others can be recognized. Every now and then one meets them. Their voices and faces are different from ours: stronger, quieter, happier, more radiant. They begin where we leave off. They are, I say, recognizable; but you must know what to look for. They will not be very like the idea of ‘religious people’ which you have formed from your general reading. They do not draw attention to themselves. You tend to think that you are being kind to them when they are really being kind to you. They love you more than other men do, but they need you less. They will usually seem to have a lot of time: you will wonder where it comes from. When you have recognized one of them, you will recognize the next one much more easily. And I strongly suspect that they recognize one another immediately and infallibly, across every barrier of color, sex, class, age, and even of creeds. In that way, to become holy is rather like joining a secret society. To put it at the very lowest, it must be great fun.
The difference between a grumpy, religious person and the new man is JOY. It is the FUN that Chesterton refers to because in the life of the Jesus follower there has been a transformation of the heart, and the whole person is being made new. David writes in Psalm 28:7, Lord is my strength, my heart trusts Him and I am helped, therefore my heart rejoices and that JOY is a virtue of Jesus that is available to all who will follow Him.

Now listen: I am not suggesting that we should all be little TIGGERS who bounce around all the time and feel happy, happy, happy. Some of us battle depression, some of us have very difficult circumstances in our lives, some of us work or live in environments or bodies where there is horrific pain, injustice, and suffering, I get that not all of us can feel or look happy all the time. But that’s really not the point: the point is that Jesus carried within in Him a deep sense of JOY…it was HIS JOY, and as a disciple, He has every intention of infusing HIS JOY into YOU, so that your JOY may be complete! That’s exactly what He said in John 15. And that is good news church, amen? Raise up your heads, all is not lost! The battle has been won, Satan has been defeated, the tomb is empty and we shall rise victorious over death! We shall join those who have gone on before us in the arms of our Savior where there will be no more death, no more pain, and all the tears shall be wiped away! Joy is ours to be had because we are the adopted children of King Jesus! Our joy is rooted in truth, and that truth can never be taken away from us! Praise be to God! Now, if we lack joy…if we say we are a Christian and yet we lack joy, that means we must get quite intentional about cultivating the joy that Jesus promised us. That leads me to my third subheading:

III. The Practice of Celebration

All of the virtues of Christ, including His Joy, come about when we think like Jesus and we practice His lifestyle. Frazee’s book, Believe does not cover the practice of celebration, but it is this particular discipline of celebration that helps to cultivate the virtue of joy. So, once again, I will point you to John Ortberg’s The Life You’ve Always Wanted, specifically the chapter on the practice of celebration as well as Richard Foster’s Celebration of Discipline and his chapter on the discipline of celebration. I would also point you to Dallas Willard’s The Spirit of the Disciplines, and Marcus Warner’s How to Grow Joy.

All four authors, and the Bible itself, insist upon the fact that this virtue of JOY that comes straight from Jesus is irreplaceable and super important if we are to enjoy, endure and be effective as disciples of Jesus. But if we lack joy, we must learn to cultivate joy, and that will require the practice of celebration.

When Nehemiah was trying to get the wall around Jerusalem rebuilt, his workers were getting tired and discouraged. So he sent off the workers with these instructions: 10 Nehemiah said, “Go and enjoy choice food and sweet drinks, and send some to those who have nothing prepared. This day is holy to our Lord. Do not grieve, for the joy of the LORD is your strength.” Nehemiah knew that those who were working hard for the Lord would become discouraged and defeated if they overlooked the joy of God that comes about in the taste of good food and drink and helping others in need. So he set aside a “holy day” for the people to feast upon good food and drink, and to serve others who had none. By the way, “holy day” is where we get our word, Holiday! Nehemiah was brilliant in setting aside a day of celebration, and he gives his reasoning at the end of the passage with these words, “The Joy of the Lord is your strength.” If you feel weak in your faith, it is likely because you have lost touch with the joy of the LORD in the most simple, every day blessings that He provides. Your life likely lacks the practice of celebration. So, here are some
ways to practice celebration as a means of cultivating the joy of the Lord and strengthening in your faith.

1) One key to cultivating joy begins with arranging our lives in such a way that sin no longer looks good! Willard writes, “…failure to attain a deeply satisfying life always has the effect of making sinful actions seem good. Here lies the strength of temptation… Normally, our success in overcoming temptation will be easier if we are basically happy in our lives. To cut off joys and pleasures associated with our bodily lives and social existence as “unspiritual,” then, can actually have the effect of weakening us in our efforts to do what is right.” Now, some of you may hear Willard and think, “So, I’m supposed to go eat ice cream or go play my favorite sport to find the joy of the Lord?” Well…maybe! Let me ask you a question: When are you most likely to give into the temptation to sin? Is it not after an exhausting day at work where you had no time to eat, no time to play with the kids, no outbursts of laughter, and no exercise? You don’t have to answer…we all know the answer is YES. A “joyless” day without good food, the love of our family, laughter and proper treatment of our bodies will make any sinful temptation look good. When we give into our sinful temptation, we experience shame and the joy of the LORD feels like it’s a million miles away. Willard is suggesting that we should thankfully, with prayer and gratitude, celebrate and enjoy the simple pleasures of good food, good company, rest and exercise as a defense against joyless, sinful indulgence. Remember: sinful pleasure is always a cheap substitute for joy. However, to enjoy the simple pleasures that God provides may actually lead you to find your joy in Him out of gratitude!

One example of this practice for me is going fishing on my day off! I know that sounds silly to some of you, but when I go fishing on a Friday morning, my joy bucket gets refilled because I am so grateful for the simple pleasure of being on the water. It leads me to pray, to give thanks, and to enjoy time with my Father who I know is right there with me. When I get home from fishing, sin does not look attractive to me at all because I am deeply satisfied with my life. I am more present with my kids, more excited to see my wife, and I sleep better at night if I get some time outdoors with my Father. The joy of the Lord can always be found in the ordinary blessings that He has already provided all around you. Ortberg writes, “Nothing is too small if it produces true joy in us and causes us to turn toward God in gratitude and delight.” Whoever thought that part of our “spiritual disciplines” would include enjoying the simple pleasures of life with gratitude?! But that is exactly what we should be doing as the means of cultivating joy in our lives.

2) Practice obedience. Foster writes, Joy is found in obedience. When the power that is in Jesus reaches into our work and play and redeems them, there will be joy where once there was mourning. To overlook this is to miss the meaning of the Incarnation. God brings about the transformation of our lives through the Disciplines, and we will not know genuine joy until there is a transforming work within us. Celebration comes when the common ventures of life are redeemed.

Foster’s point is super important. A life riddled with destructive habits will be a life void of joy. That is why no quick fix book or short cut will lead us to joy. However, when we submit our lives to the practices of Jesus, when we begin to see our everyday lives being transformed through the love of Christ, we will discover a joy that is powerful and lasting. This is the difference between “knowing the truth” and “living the truth.” When we live our lives in simple obedience, we will discover a joy that we have never known.
3) Discipline Your Mind to View Life from a Biblical Perspective. Part of the practice of celebration is applying the truths of scripture to every situation that arises throughout your day. No matter what happens to you today, you would be amazed how much joy you might retain by simply saying, “The Tomb is empty…Christ has risen!” Or, perhaps you might remind yourself that “The Lord is near.” When I am struggling internally, my joy can be found in the first line of the 139th Psalm, “Oh Lord, you have searched me and you know me…”

A biblical worldview provides a Joy-Filled perspective in any and all circumstances because Jesus wins. The tomb is empty, death has been defeated, and even now Our Lord sits at the right hand of the Father, interceding for His church. There are angels all around us, some who have been assigned to care for us. The Holy Spirit resides with us, and there is no power in heaven or on earth that can compare to the power of God’s Holy Spirit! No matter what anyone says to me, I am a child of the most high God! I have been adopted, and I am an heir to all that He has promised. My time on earth is limited, but when I breath my last I get to go home. No sickness, no persecution, no temptation, no failure, no success will make my Father love me less or more…His love for me is from everlasting to everlasting, and nothing…not one single thing…can separate me from the love of God through Jesus my Savior.

That eternal, biblical perspective protects my joy every day, in every circumstance, and that perspective will give all of us as believers the joy and the strength that we need to endure, enjoy, and prevail in the days that remain!

Listen, there are several more ways to practice celebration and to cultivate your joy in the Lord. I encourage you to read the books I’ve mentioned and to continue the disciplines we covered earlier in the series. The virtue of Joy is yours to enjoy as the transformation of your character leads you to become more and more like Jesus.

The joy of the Lord is our strength…thanks be to God! Let’s pray.