

**Choose Joy**  
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Good morning, everyone.

It's good to be here. It's good to see you. Happy new Year.

It looks like we have a number of our own members out today, with sickness and travel. So, we pray for all those who are out. We welcome those who are visiting.

I'm grateful for the opportunity to preach this morning, to share God's word, and hope that the things we study together will be useful.

It's the time of year where many of us make resolutions. If you're like me, it's just the same list from last year and the year before ... and maybe the year before that.

But this is not a lesson about making resolutions.

However, I do have a question to begin the lesson this morning. How many of you, if you do make resolutions, purpose this year to choose joy? Choose to be more joyful?

I'm guessing that few of us listed that as one of our resolutions.

Today's lesson is titled "Choose Joy."

If you have your Bibles, please turn to Galatians chapter five and verse 22.

We'll start there in just a minute.

We've been studying the topic of joy on Wednesday evenings. It's been a really good study. If you haven't been able to join us, you're really missing out on that.

It had caused me to think a little differently about the topic, and what a need it might be for us as a church, a local church, but also as God's people throughout the world.

And then just for me personally.

So, I'll ask you the question, are you joyful? Are you a joyful person? What would other people think about that question? How about your coworkers? Would your coworkers describe you as joyful? Would your classmates describe you as a joyful person? How about your neighbors? How about your family? Would your family describe you as joyful? Maybe we're joyful only in certain environments.

There are a lot of studies that suggest that we are the most difficult with the people that we're the closest to, namely our family.

Our family sometimes gets our leftovers, while we use up all of our joy on strangers or on people that we may never see again.

How about your spouse? Are you joyful for your spouse? Are you joyful for your parents? How about for your children? Your friends? How about for each other as a church family here? Are you joyful with each other?

There are many people who are truly joyful, and I think about the number of Christians here.

There's a couple that come to mind that just seem to always be joyful no matter their situation.

Think about someone in your life who is joyful. I won't ask you to share it, but just think about who that person is and what type of qualities that person exudes.

There are also many people who are not joyful. This may be easier. Think about someone in your life who is not joyful. And if you're like me, maybe, well, there's that cranky neighbor, or that cranky Christian that we worship with.

Maybe it's that coworker that's just never joyful. It may be a bit easier to identify joy when you think about people who are not joyful.

Pam and I took a trip over the holidays with the kids. We went out west, and I don't know if any of you have flown lately, but there's a lot of people on airplanes that do not seem to be joyful.

The airports were packed. Every seat on the plane was full. And Pam and I were commenting like, "what's happened?" It feels like a lot of people have just lost their manners, and their patience, and their consideration for others.

When the plane stops, there used to be an unwritten rule that you wait at your row until it's your turn to move forward.

But not anymore. It's just like, if you can get to the front of that plane and exit sooner than anyone else, then that's okay. There's a lot of people who just do not seem to be joyful.

So what does joy mean? It's a little bit of a hard word to define. The dictionary describes joy as a mindset, or state, of happiness. Not just happiness by itself, but with a feeling of contentment.

A lot of times we use "joy" and "happy" interchangeably. There is a lot of overlap, but there's some difference between the two as well.

The Greek word translated as "joy" is used 59 times in the New Testament. It means gladness or delight. It also means choosing to be cheerful.

It is more about one's outlook in a given circumstance. This is literally what the word joy, or joyous, or joyful means. It is the outlook one chooses in a given circumstance.

While it is similar to being happy, I suggest that it's much deeper than being happy.

Happy is a feeling, if you'll accept this explanation. And it's a great feeling.

Who doesn't want to be happy? However, joy is more of an attitude. And that's part of how our Wednesday Bible study has challenged me. It has really challenged me to think differently about joy and the choices we make.

There are a few other words used to describe joy. One would be "gladness."

I love these two: "contentment" and "gratitude." And although they're not precise synonyms, they are two other ways to describe what joy means.

Joy is a state or a condition. Happiness is perhaps better described as an emotion.

Joy is constant, while happiness is temporary. Joy is internal while happiness is more external.

Joy centers around God. Happiness comes from the environment.

And so, is it possible to find joy even when there's really bad things happening? And this was one of the questions that came up in our Bible study. "How can I be joyful? How can God expect me to be joyful when my life has been ruined?"

People that you and I know and think often about, over the last two or three years, here among our local church, have dealt with unimaginable loss, involving children, and spouses, and brothers and sisters in Christ. Folks have lost jobs and their health.

How do you rectify that with God's word? Like, how could we be expected to be joyful amid so much heartbreak, loss, and tragedy?

We certainly will not answer all those really hard questions this morning. But there are three very simple points that we'll try to answer.

The first one is, "What does the Bible even say about joy?"

Let's just read from God's word, what we're told about joy. Not happiness, but joy.

Let's do that first.

Then, let's look at a few characters in the Bible who are examples of joyful living.

And I didn't just pick the ones who have great lives as you might imagine.

And finally, let's see how we can live in a more joyful way.

If you will, turn to Galatians five and verse 22. This is a pretty well-known passage.

Here we read about the fruit of the Spirit. The fruits of the Spirit.

"But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness." Many of you probably have these qualities memorized.

Notice that the second characteristic, or attribute, which is part of the fruit of the Spirit, is "joy." Joy is in among things like love and faithfulness.

And when we consider the attributes that we're required to have as Christians, speaking for myself, I imagine we forget about joy.

I think sometimes we all forget about joy.

We know that we need to love; we need to love others; we need to love God.

We know we need to be faithful.

We know we need to be kind. Yet we are told to have joy as well.

Paul, in Romans chapter 14 and verse 17 says that the kingdom of God is joy in the Holy Spirit.

And he also says that we are not pleasing to God if we do not exhibit or demonstrate joy. Have you ever really thought about that? There's a few points in the lesson today that may step on some toes, certainly mine. Yet we're told from God's Word that we can't please God if we're not joyful.

Perhaps you view joy, or maybe the less "deep" word "happy," as optional for the Christian. However, I hope after we read these verses, you'll realize that it is required by God to please Him.

Now, some misinterpret this to mean that God wants me to be happy, which is why I talked a little bit about the differences between joy and happiness.

I think God does want his people to be happy. I don't think God purposes that He is going to make His people as miserable as they can be.

The way I understand it, as I read about it in the Bible, we do not find anywhere that happiness is a guarantee. We are not promised happiness if we obey God, become a Christian, and serve Him faithfully.

In fact, in some passages we find quite the opposite.

Take James, for example, when he's writing to the Jewish Christians. Remember these were Jewish Christians who were dispersed.

We don't use that word a lot today. But it basically means that they had to run away and hide.

They were scattered.

And why were they scattered? Because they were being beaten. They were being persecuted. They were physically being killed and hurt.

In James chapter 1 and verses 2-4, James says "Count it all joy when you fall into various trials." Of all the things that he could have said to them, he says, "count it, my brethren, all joy when you meet trials of various kinds."

How can that be? James is not speaking about something foreign to him. He understands. Is he not empathetic to their situation? He says, “be joyful.”

He's not telling them to be happy that your brothers and your mothers are being killed, and your fellow Christians.

He's telling them to be joyful in the circumstances that they have.

We live in a world where joy is often sought in the wrong things. And I imagine many of us have been guilty of this. I know I have.

But what makes you joyful? If someone at your work or a friend or a neighbor says, like, “What makes you happy? What do you say?”

Setting aside, for a moment, God's Word and the good news of the Gospel, what do you say?

Many of us would say, sports make me joyful. I love to play sports. I love to watch sports.

We were so excited to see the Browns make it to a playoff game after such an unlikely series of events. We love sports.

What about cars? I love cars and trucks. And anything with an engine makes me happy.

I know Calvin likes cars and that makes Calvin joyful. Right, Calvin?

What about entertainment? We went and saw a show down in Cleveland this weekend. It was just beautiful. The play? It was just wonderful. It made us all very happy to see that.

How about work? Does work make you joyful? For some of us, it may make us the opposite of joyful. But for most of us, we find great joy and happiness in working and providing and learning.

How about school? How about wealth?

These things, in and of themselves, are not bad things. But I think sometimes we find joy, I look for joy, in the wrong places. God did not intend for Christians to find joy through “things.”

The Bible says a lot about that. It doesn't mean things and experiences are bad. Probably one of the most beautiful things we find joy in is our family and our friends, right? Many of us find joy in the time we get to spend traveling or playing games or laughing or sharing a meal. Those are all good things.

Remember the preacher in Ecclesiastes? If you've studied that recently, the preacher, in chapter one, refers to these as “pursuits.”

But starting in verse two, we read “vanity of vanities.” Not only emptiness, but empty of empty. The emptiest things you could pursue. Things like power, wealth, entertainment, sports, and work. All of these things are worthless compared to the joy that's ours when we are content with everything serving Christ brings in this life and the life to come.

The Bible doesn't teach us that things are the source of joy.

When God describes the need for Christians to have joy, He's not saying that we should indulge in selfish pursuits so that "things" will make you joyful.

The Bible teaches us to have joy regardless of our circumstances. Joy is an active responsibility to enjoy the life God has given us, regardless of our own life situation.

That doesn't mean we shouldn't try to improve our situation. You can't just say, you know, I'm gonna be lazy and not work and not improve my situation.

That's not what that means.

In Romans chapter 12, I'll just read a couple other verses I found that I like. By the way, there's almost 60 verses in the New Testament, plus many in the Old Testament, which talk about joy and happiness.

Romans 12:12: "Rejoice or be joyful in hope. Be patient again in tribulation."

You think it's just by chance that joy is often mentioned along with trials?

"Be constant in prayer."

So, be joyful even when there are trials, and pray.

John chapter 6 and verse 24, "Until now you have asked for nothing in My name; ask, and you will receive, that your joy may be made full."

That your joy, not only your faith, kindness, and love, but also that your joy will be made full.

Proverbs chapter 17 and verse 22. I love this passage. If you are one that writes passages in your Bible, or cross references, this would be a good one.

And I love the Proverbs. There's so much practical wisdom and advice.

Chapter 17 and verse 22, "A joyful heart is good, but a broken spirit or a unjoyful heart dries up the bones."

It's hard to imagine what "dry bones" fully means, but it's not a positive thing.

Joy is good medicine. It's the best medicine we can take. In Psalm chapter 32 and verse 11, "Be glad in the LORD and rejoice, you righteous; And shout for joy, all you upright in heart!

Rejoice! Shout for joy! All in one verse.

Philippians may be "the" book, if you had to point to one book that Paul penned, with the most direction on joy.

In chapter four verse four Paul says to be joyful in the Lord. "Rejoice in the Lord, always. And again, I say rejoice"

It doesn't say, "Be joyful in the Lord when you're healthy." It doesn't say, "Be joyful in the Lord when everyone in your family is good." Or when the grades are high, or when your work career is on track. No! It says, be joyful in the Lord always. Always!

Paul adds, "And again, I say it, rejoice!"

Here's a verse we use a lot: First Thessalonians five and verse 17. You know this verse. It says "Pray without what ceasing. That means constantly pray.

Now, have you ever read the next verse? The next verse, verse 18, says, "Be thankful in all circumstances, for this is God's will for you who belong in Christ Jesus."

It's not the same word as joyful, but it says, be thankful in all your circumstances.

I won't single out anyone in particular. You know who you are. Is it easy to be joyful or thankful when someone you love dies. or someone gets sick, or someone has a terrible life event?

It's really difficult. These are times of mourning.

The scripture doesn't say to be thankful or joyful "with" all of your circumstances. This is a point my Dad shared with me that I thought was great.

The scripture says, "be thankful "in" all your circumstances. "In," not "for." That's powerful. It says to be thankful, to be joyful, with, or amid, all your circumstances.

So that's a little bit of what the Bible says. There's a lot more, I probably didn't do it justice.

So let's look at a couple examples of joyful living in the Bible. There are so many of these. I just picked out a few.

Nehemiah, maybe an unlikely one.

Nehemiah chapter eight verses 9 and 10.

After supervising the rebuilding of the walls of Jerusalem after the exile, Nehemiah had the people listen to God's word. And they wept because they realized that they had disobeyed God.

But Nehemiah turned their hearts to rejoicing. He explained that the day of reading God's word is holy, and the joy of the Lord is their strength.

So, he turned their guilt and their weeping and their sorrow to joy by reading God's word.

Nehemiah urged them to celebrate and exchange gifts in that passage. This led to a great feast and a great celebration.

So, the point that I took from this is when you need more joy, open your Bible and read.

How about Paul? Paul May be one of the more popular examples of this. He faced many hardships. He went to jail. He was in prison. He was beaten. He was in a terrible storm. He was shipwrecked.

But he always spoke of joy. Paul's joy came from many sources, especially from how he focused his thoughts.

He had gratitude for the support and the gifts that were sent to him. He was joyful because of that.

In Philippians chapter four and in Colossians chapter one, he was grateful, or joyful, because of the faith of others, and for the love of Christians.

He said he was joyful in Second Timothy four and verse seven. He said he lived his life with no regret, as he focused on loving people and trusting God.

In Philippians chapter four Paul speaks of contentment. In any circumstance, he allowed God to work in him. And he always had a positive outlook.

People might tend to say, "Well, why are they so positive?" It's because Paul and others like him maintained a positive outlook.

Paul observed that his imprisonment encouraged others to speak out and it helped grow the kingdom.

In Philippians chapter one, he had hope in his eternal future. Adopting all these principles, he let go of the anxieties and chose to live with more joy.

How about Joseph? You remember the story of Joseph.

What happened to Joseph? His brothers hated him. They had great jealousy toward him. They ended up trying to kill him. Ultimately, they threw him in a big pit, a big hole. And then they sold him to into slavery.

But the Bible says that, even though Joseph was a slave, was thrown into prison, and lost 13 years of his life, the Lord was with Joseph.

So, he became a successful man and servant. The Lord was with Joseph and extended kindness to him and gave him favor in the sight of the chief jailer. And whatever Joseph did, the Lord made him to prosper. Genesis chapter 39.

Do you think Joseph would have succeeded in these circumstances if he was angry and complaining? He kept his faith and joy in the Lord, who then honored and blessed him.

We studied Ruth, I think about a year ago. A famine forces Elimelech, and his wife Naomi, from their Israelite home to the country of Moab. Elimelech dies and Naomi is left with her two sons who soon married two Moabite girls, Orpah and Ruth.

Later both of the sons die and Naomi is left alone with Orpah and Ruth in a strange land.

Orpah returns to her parents, but Ruth determines to stay with Naomi they journey back to Bethlehem.



The story of love and devotion tells of Ruth's eventual marriage to a wealthy man named Boaz, by whom she bears a son Obed, who becomes the grandfather of David in the ancestry of Jesus.

Obedience brings Ruth into the privileged lineage of Christ.

We also might remember the courage of Esther in her conduct, and remember her plea to King Xerxes. She, like Naomi and Ruth, had an unwavering attitude of joy in challenging circumstances.

Mary. Imagine Mary, the mother of Jesus, the confusion, the pain and the trials throughout her life.

And now to our final point. How can we live in a more joyful way? That's really what I'm trying to learn from this study.

We can find joy through reading God's word, and through dwelling on God's word.

Romans chapter 15 and verses four through six. I won't read it in its entirety, but this is basically what it says: "How about finding joy through serving others?"

In Second Corinthians chapter eight, "Now, brothers and sisters, we make known to you the grace of God, which has been given in the churches of Macedonia."

This is Paul writing, saying that in a great ordeal of affliction, their abundance of joy and their deep poverty overflowed in the wealth of their giving.

Like, how is that even reconcilable? They served others even though they weren't wealthy, and they were struggling.

This one may be hard to hear. It's hard for me.

Don't allow worry to rule supreme. One of the points in the lesson material on Wednesday, which I loved, said "worry is a joy thief."

Philippians chapter four and verses six and seven, "Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving, let your requests be known to God."

We're told not to be worriers, nor to be anxious, in First Peter chapter five we're told to cast all of our anxieties and worries on Jesus because he cares for us.

Another Proverb. Proverbs chapter 12 and verse 25, "anxiety in a man's heart weighs him down."

I've got a bunch more here, but I'm not going to read them all. But Matthew chapter six, "seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness. And all these things will be added to you.

Therefore, do not be anxious. Do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will be worry enough for itself."

Finding joy by limiting the worry that we have is, I think, a really important way for us to live more joyfully.

By the way, sometimes you worry because you care. You worry about your children. You worry about your finances. You worry about your health.

But you can't walk around being Pollyanna all the time, wanting life to be great.

We can't allow ourselves to be controlled by things that most of the time will never happen. Isn't that what we kind of do to ourselves?

How about finding joy by counting our blessings? It's hard to lack joy when you are grateful.

Is there anyone better off than you? We probably all could say, "yeah." In worldly terms, there are a lot of people who have better living circumstances.

But I can tell you that there are a lot of people that are worse off than you. People who would love to be in the situation that you are in today, and would be incredibly joyful to have the life that you have or that I have.

And of course, we realize that our eternal life awaits us. That's the ultimate reason to live with joy.

What is the opposite of joy? Again, these are my words.

I kind of found some of these just looking at some online sources.

How about misery, agony, being down in the dumps? Are you that person? Like, are you the person who's always down regardless of the circumstances? You know, we, on Wednesday night, had names for those people. Like, Debbie Downer or Negative Nelly. And you know, I'm sure there's some for the men somewhere in there.

But are you that person? One who just drains the energy because you don't have joy, when as Christians we have the most things to be joyful for?

Sometimes it can be hard to have joy. Joy is a conscious choice, and it definitely won't always be easy.

How about the parent who has a very sick child? I don't know how to answer that.

I know a lot of people who would just love to have a child, sick or healthy.

How about those who lost a spouse? Can't even imagine that.

We have some friends who would give anything to even have a spouse; to ever had a spouse.

So, much of choosing to be joyful has to do with our perspective.

And that, as we conclude, is what I want us to think about.

How will we choose to live? How will we choose to view our circumstances?

And so, I ask, are you joyful? Are you choosing joy in your life? Does serving God make you joyful?

These are tough questions. Is it hard to tell? Are we joyful? Does serving God make us happy? Does it make you joyful? Does it make me happy?

Being joyful is a decision. It's a state of mind. It's not something that happens to you.

You are the only person that can control it. Only you can determine if you are joyful. Only you can determine to choose joy.

No one can do it for you. But more importantly, no one can take it from you.

So, choose joy.

Think about that.

I hope these thoughts have been helpful to you in some way.

Jeff's going to lead a song of imitation. If we can help you in any way, the Invitation of Christ stands. You can come forward as we sing this song.