

What gives you joy? Have you thought about it lately? Here's some things that do it for me: Standing on top of a mountain in Tahoe, crunchy snow under my skis, clear blue sky, untracked powder in front of me, anticipating Christmas morning, and unwrapping presents with my family together. Also seeing a beautiful sunset in Hawaii at 7 pm every night, sitting on the seawall in Maui with the whole town watching together in awe. Simply sitting with a long-time friend- having coffee together, feeling safe, known, and able to pick up where we left off - deep friendship.

What about you? What gives you joy? Are there some images, memories or even dreams that come to your mind when you think about joy? Is it possible to experience joy even when you've worked hard to prepare for a new job; you've made it to the "final round," and then you get a call from the company saying they've given it to someone else. A family member or we ourselves are hurting or experiencing loss? We find ourselves in circumstances that are way beyond our control? Wouldn't be great to go into the new year and experience joy? We all want it, but often, we're just not sure how to find the real thing or how to keep it if or when we do find it!

Earlier this month, there was a great article in the SF Chronicle that caught my eye. It began by saying this:

"The Golden State Warriors are searching for one of the most elusive properties in sports. What they're looking for is not as tangible as a third consecutive Larry O'Brien Trophy. It's a feeling that has defined the high points of their dynasty but has been missing in recent weeks because of self-inflicted drama (reports that a few team members were getting on one another's nerves) that has sapped the proud group of one of the most valuable commodities in basketball: Joy."

Joy! Have you watched them play? They're full of joy when they play. Have you seen Steph Curry's smile? Each player is not just concerned about their own success, but their teammate's success as well. This joy even carries them when there's a challenge in front of them.

The article continues with,

"I feel like a lot of people confuse joy and happiness," Warriors forward Kevin Durant told ESPN. "I think happiness is a feeling that is fleeting. That's not a feeling that we always have. We go

back and forth with that all the time. I feel like joy is something that you can stand on. And when you're enjoying what you do, you don't mind the adversity, the tough times, the challenges or the little obstacles you've got to climb to get to where you want to go. I think joy is something that we can always hold onto."

I knew I loved this team!

The article went on to say that the Warriors have been able to maintain their edge over the past four years- in part- because of the effort this group puts into both teaching and practicing the art of joy on a daily basis.

I think we can be taught how to practice the art of joy too. The Bible has some great truths to teach as well as practices in which to engage that I think will help us cultivate the art of joy on a daily basis.

What I love about the Psalms is that they're prayers, poems and songs, that are there to help us leave the world of our anxieties and chaos and enter instead into a world of wonder and hope - away from our egos into the presence of God. The very first Psalm is the entry way to the entire book, and the writer gives us an invitation. In Psalm 1, we're invited to engage in some practices that will help us find joy and keep it deep inside of us.

Blessed is the one who does not walk in step with the wicked or stand in the way that sinners take or sit in the company of mockers, but whose delight is in the law of the LORD, and who meditates on his law day and night. That person is like a tree planted by streams of water, which yields its fruit in season and whose leaf does not wither—whatever they do prospers. Not so the wicked! They are like chaff that the wind blows away. Therefore the wicked will not stand in the judgment, nor sinners in the assembly of the righteous. For the LORD watches over the way of the righteous, but the way of the wicked leads to destruction. Psalm 1

Here is a beautiful picture of what joy looks like. We're offered two different paths that we can choose to take every day. The first three verses speak of the blessed path, and the next two verses speak of the not-so-blessed path. Psalm one starts with the word, "blessed." Did anyone get a Christmas card with #blessed this year? Well, in the original language it's such a rich and expressive word, which literally means, "O how very happy

or joyful." Doesn't this create some expectation in you? There is this sense that we are entering a way in which we'll become more our true selves. There's an anticipation that being blessed works changes in us, which make us capable of being a blessing, too!

Who is blessed or so very joyful? The one who stays away from evil. They don't walk in step with the "wicked." This means they are cautious and careful with the advice they listen to and who's giving it to them. By the way, the wicked aren't just evil, bad people who have committed heinous acts of violence or are social deviants. No, they're anyone who doesn't have a place for God in their lives. They are self-centered rather than God-centered—they move away from Him instead of toward Him. Have you considered whose advice you listen to?

And the blessed don't "stand in the way sinners take." This has to do with our actions and our habits. The godly don't settle into or make themselves comfortable and at home in the habits and lifestyles of those who don't consider God. God calls us to an active spirituality, not a passive spirituality—not just to sit by and let life happen to us, but to make choices—little ones and big ones that will lead us down the path he invites us to be on. That's what will cultivate true joy in our life! What habits are you cultivating actively and even passively?

I had a job in San Francisco before I landed in vocational ministry. I loved the people I worked with and was invited to go on a ski trip for the weekend. Let's just say it got a little crazy. I remember deciding I needed to go home a day early because it just wasn't good for me to be there. It was too much of a party scene where I was expected to be "all-in." That taught me to pay attention to my weaknesses and what might tempt me. I could be with them, but I had to limit my time around them. No one else would've known or cared, but I needed to care and make that choice for me and my life with God.

I have some "mom" friends that I've had for years who are overall really fun women. But sometimes have a tendency to gossip, do a little too much husband bashing and kid-exaggerating, and talk about their extravagant trips. When I'm around them too much, I can feel like I'm entitled to do the same. I can become discontent in a nanosecond, get negative, and feel less-than. It's just not healthy for me. Is there anyone like that in your life? Are there some adjustments you might need to make?

If you'll notice, there's a progression in verse one. There is a gradual turning toward evil. It goes from walking, to standing, and finally, to sitting in the company of mockers. To sit means you've kind of moved in. You've made their habits and lifestyle yours. You find yourself doing the same things they do. And worst of all, you're getting to the point where you're not even considering God.

This does not mean we should stay away from people who don't know Him. Jesus spent time with well-known sinners of his day and so should we! The difference has to do with how these people influence you. Jesus had a strong influence over those he chose to spend time with. They didn't pull him down; He pulled them up! We need to pray for them, look for ways to show Christ's love to them. We're called to be salt and light, but also, to be careful and wise. Salt can lose its saltiness, and light can lose its brightness. We need to thoughtfully and prayerfully consider how we invest in our friendships.

Be careful. Evil has a subtle way of overtaking us. You might be here today wondering how you ever got in the situation you're in. And if you allow yourself to look back, it might have been one small decision after another, and before you know it, you've gone from walking to standing and from standing to sitting in the company of not the best crowd for you. Think about your life. Don't be passive. You've got to choose every day.

The psalmist warns us to not to go down that path but go down this one. The path where we delight in, take pleasure in, and find joy in "meditating on the law of the Lord." What does that mean? I used to think it meant reading the Bible all the time. Checking "spiritual" things off my list. Well, that's not it at all! It means: ponder, imagine, consider, chew on, and determine your highest priority. We're all meditating on, and chewing on something during the day - finances, our kids, our job security, what other people think of us. What do you meditate on? Where does your mind go when you day-dream? The Psalmist encourages us to choose to meditate on the law of the Lord, and that's not just to know and do all the rules. It's making His Word the rule of your life. And what is his law?

"Love other people as well as you do yourself. You can't go wrong when you love others. When you add up everything in the law code, the total is love..." (Romans 13:10, The Message).

When Jesus was asked what the most important commandment in the law was, He said,

"Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength...and the second is this: Love your neighbor as yourself. There is no commandment greater than these" (Mark 12:28).

During the entire Christmas season, a line from "O Holy Night" went over and over again in my mind. "His law is love and his Gospel is peace..." Just think about it. If you ponder, meditate on His law of love, what could happen? Psalm one says, "You will be like a tree..." Did you know that scripture continuously portrays trees as things that communicate to us? What's a tree like? Well, picture a beautiful tree in your mind. Every tree is subject to seasons. They are not always blossoming or fruitful. There can be cold winters and very dry summers, and a tree feels the effects

of those things. But, unlike other trees, the tree spoken about in this passage is planted by streams of water. Because of this, the roots have access to a constant source of water, which is always there, even when heat or drought comes.

I want to be joyful. I want to cultivate the art of joy in my life and, what I'm learning is that real joy is never found in externals. I know you want to experience joy and live your life with joy in this new year, but it doesn't just happen. If we seek it in our circumstances, we'll never find it. You know why? Because joy is under us, inside us, where our roots are. A joy-filled Christian is someone who has been rooted in something besides him or herself. It's why the Bible says that, if we're believers, we've been made "partakers of the divine nature" (2 Peter 2:4.)

Something's been planted in us and has become part of us. We've been rooted in God. We've accepted for ourselves God's unconditional love and forgiveness and have been born and "planted" into his family and have become his child. Have you ever noticed that trees can't plant themselves? Something (someone) has come and planted you! That is where you draw from. That is the source of true joy. It definitely takes time to grow and cultivate, but that's true joy. Do you see how basic and important that is? A tree, even by a river, experiences affliction. It's affected by hurts—yet, its leaf never withers.

Experiencing joy means knowing that even when there's no fruit, you're going to be okay because your roots are down into something else, something solid - God Himself! And there's something about hard things that make you put your roots down even more. The joy that's underneath us isn't this, "Hey, everything's going great!" Smile, smile, smile. It's a joy God Himself gives. It's permanent and deep and is even fueled by tough circumstances. Do you see it? It's how we can tell if we've got an up and down happiness or real joy. Things will go wrong. But, if you go to Him and put your roots down, there will be joy that comes up. This tree yields its fruit in season and in God's time.

"Whatever they do prospers"— This does not mean you'll be rich, popular, and everything goes just the way you want it to. But, like the theologian, Dan Hayden states, prosper in this text means, "to push forward; to pass through; to get on." It carries the idea of thriving..."

We've seen the path of the blessed who delight in the Lord. They are like a tree - strong and nourished by streams. They have joy. And now here's a warning of a second path that those who don't follow God or care about His ways can take. They will be like chaff: ground up corn husks that the wind blows away — what a contrast. They are never strong enough to stand through the ups and downs of life. The Lord watches over the way of the righteous, but the way of the wicked leads to destruction, nothing good, a dead end.

Here's a definition of joy I'd like you to remember:

"Biblical joy is the satisfaction and contentment that comes from knowing God personally—and encountering the unchanging privileges we have in Him. It's NOT the absence of hard or bad things in our life, but it is our ability to face them with God's perspective and hope" (Tim Keller).

Shaun Livingston, another Warrior, at the end of the article I mentioned earlier said: "Happiness can be fleeting. It can be temporary—but joy is kind of long-lasting. It's a spirit that's inside of you." He's so right. Joy is inside of us as individuals and as a church. Just like the Warriors as a team, your joy affects other people's joy. Do you know that? The opposite is true too. Do you think joy would help people want to come to church and hang out with us?

It's that time when most of us make some new year resolutions. Over the next day and a half, think about some practical ways you can delight in the Lord. Absolutely read your Bible but not just for information and facts to check something off your list. Allow His word to get inside you and work its meaning in you by thinking about Him and His law of love for you and others. Be still and listen to Him while you're driving, cleaning the house, listening to music, writing in a journal, before you get out of bed, and before you turn out the lights.

On the morning of Tuesday, September 11, 2001, I was getting myself and my girls ready for school. I was supposed to speak on joy at a mom's group at my former church. I got a call from a friend at 7:45 am. She asked me if I had the TV on and told me I better take a look. I turned it on and watched in equal parts horror and numbness. Needless to say, the talk on joy went out the window. But a group of about 200 women- many of whom had husbands that were on cross-country or international flights, and didn't know if they were ok or not, who needed to be together. We were scared and nervous. So, what we did was pray and read the Psalms. We corporately cried out to the Lord, who was the source of our life and our rootedness. We made the choice to trust Him and to believe His promise that our security was in Him. We chose to believe that He would hold us, our families, and our world somehow. And in those moments, His joy came in the form of hope and peace — a settled assurance that our roots would hold firm, no matter what.

Dear Lord, we need you. Thank you for your word—for your invitation to cultivate authentic joy in our lives. Thank you that you've planted us by streams of water. Help us to delight in you and your love - meditating on you day and night in this coming year. And when we falter, by your grace, guide us back to the path. May your joy be our strength in this coming year.

This manuscript represents the bulk of what was preached at CPC South. For further detail, please refer to the audio recording of this sermon.

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