

“THE NATURE OF CHRISTIAN JOY”

I. Introduction

- A. In a recent article, Carl Trueman makes the astute observation that, in our society, “personal happiness is now the foundational criterion for judging the morality of acts and institutions.” [<https://wng.org/opinions/assisted-suicide-and-the-happiness-imperative-1710410310>]
1. This is the reason why moral deviancies are so often deemed to be good things in our day.
 2. A lot of people have taken a positive view of things like sex outside of marriage, pornography, no-fault divorce, the murder of unborn babies, homosexuality, transgenderism, marijuana use, and physician-assisted suicide.
 3. Those who advocate for such things claim that they are good because people’s personal happiness depends on them.
 4. It sometimes seems like the only sin that remains in our society is failing to support people in whatever it is that they think will make them feel happy.
- B. There is a significant difference between psychological happiness and Christian joy.
1. In the former, the standard of happiness is a person’s feelings.
 2. In other words, happiness is merely a matter of personal taste.
 3. According to this way of thinking, when we meet someone whose idea of happiness differs from ours, we are expected to shrug and politely say, “Whatever makes you happy.”

4. Christian joy is different.
5. Christian joy has an objective moral standard.
6. It is grounded upon something outside the self: what God says about that which is right and true and good.
7. As we study these verses from Paul's letter to the Philippians this evening, we will see how he calls attention to three characteristics of Christian joy that flow from its objective basis.
8. Christian joy is patient, it is prayerful, and it is peaceful.

II. A Patient Joy

- A. Our text begins with Paul telling his readers, "Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice."
 1. As we have noted throughout this sermon series, joy is a key emphasis in this letter.
 2. Joy is also a characteristic mark of biblical faith.
 3. It is part of the fruit of the Spirit, fruit that is produced in the life of every Christian.
 4. This explains why Paul *commands* Christians to be joyful here.
 5. The Greek verb "Rejoice" is in the imperative mood.
 6. Being joyful is an act of obedience on our part.
 7. This confronts a common misperception, the idea that joy is primarily a matter of emotion.
 8. On the contrary, joy has to do with our mind and will before it has to do with our feelings.

9. The way to be joyful is to allow our thinking to be informed and guided by God's truth and to make our wills conform to that truth.
 10. Christian joy transcends feelings and circumstances.
 11. Even when you are faced with trials of various kinds, God commands you to be patient in the face of them and to rejoice.
- B. This does not mean that we all need to be sickeningly cheerful Pollyannas.
1. Christian joy does not live in denial of life's hard realities.
 2. Remember, Paul was writing these words from prison.
 3. As we saw earlier in the letter, he faced up to the fact that his imprisonment could end in his execution.
 4. On top of that, he did not gloss over the fact that the Christians in Philippi were going through trials of their own.
 5. As he said at the end of chapter 1, "it has been granted to you that for the sake of Christ you should not only believe in him but also suffer for his sake."
 6. God ordains that his people will at times suffer for his sake.
 7. This shows us that Christian joy is compatible with sadness and suffering.
 8. We can rejoice even when our circumstances are not very happy.
 9. We see a good example of this in the book of Habakkuk, where the prophet says, "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." (Hab. 3:17-18)

- C. Paul's words also tell us that Christian joy is rooted in the Lord Jesus.
 - 1. We rejoice "in the Lord," in who he is and what he does.
 - 2. This tells us that the focus of Christian joy is not inward, but outward.
 - 3. It is not about looking inside ourselves to see how we are feeling at any given moment.
 - 4. It is about looking at Jesus and rejoicing in the depths of his great love for us.
 - 5. The thing that makes Christian joy unshakeable is that it is ultimately grounded upon the objective reality of the salvation that we have in Christ.

- D. The patient nature of Christian joy is further emphasized by Paul's words, "Let your reasonableness be known to everyone."
 - 1. The term that the ESV translates as "reasonableness" refers to having forbearance in our dealings with other people.
 - 2. It can also be translated as "gentleness."
 - 3. It has to do with not always insisting on your rights in your dealings with other people.
 - 4. The person who is always rejoicing in the Lord will be less concerned with making sure that his rights are always upheld.
 - 5. Because his focus is upon the Lord, he will find it easier to overlook offenses.

- E. The virtue of patient forbearance is cultivated in us as we remember that the Lord is at hand.

1. There are two senses in which Paul's words "The Lord is at hand" could be understood.
2. On the one hand, Paul could be referring to the fact that the Lord is always present with his people by the power of his Holy Spirit.
3. On the other hand, Paul could be saying that the Lord's return in glory could take place at any moment.
4. Both of these things are true, and it is entirely possible that Paul had both of them in mind as he wrote this.
5. The important thing is that, as Christians, we are to conduct our lives with the understanding that we are living before the face of God.
6. This is a truth that every Christian affirms in theory, but it is something that we can easily forget as we go about our day-to-day lives.
7. Being overwhelmed by life's sorrows, always insisting on our rights, worrying — these things are indicators that we are losing sight of the fact that our Lord is with us right now and that it will not be long before he returns in glory to consummate his kingdom.
8. Never forget that the Lord is at hand

III. A Prayerful Joy

- A. In addition to being patient, Christian joy is also prayerful.
 1. We see this in Paul's instruction for his readers to not "be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God."
 2. Notice the contrast that Paul sets here, the contrast between being anxious and being prayerful.

3. Prayer is the Bible's antidote to worry and anxiety.
 4. Whenever you find yourself worrying about something, you should let it be a prompt for you to pray.
 5. As Sinclair Ferguson reminds us, "Anxiety cannot continue to breathe easily in an atmosphere suffused with prayer." [104]
 6. There are a lot of things to worry about in this life.
 7. We could be anxious about money, our loved ones, our health, our job, our home, politics, the future, death, and all sorts of other things.
 8. But worry exhibits a lack of confidence in God.
 9. Put your anxiety to death by turning it into a matter prayer.
- B. This relates to a broader biblical principle.
1. The Christian life is not just a matter of avoiding the things that we shouldn't do.
 2. It is also a matter of doing the things that God calls us to do.
 3. The way for us to turn away from what is sinful is by doing what is godly.
 4. Paul describes this elsewhere in his letters by using the language of putting off the old self and putting on the new self.
 5. This is what we are doing when we cultivate the habit of regular prayer.
 6. We are putting off the old, anxious self, and putting on the new, trusting self that we have been given in Jesus Christ.

- C. Our text instructs us to bring two kinds of prayers to the Lord.
1. First, we should bring our requests and supplications to God.
 2. We are the dear children of our heavenly Father, and he wants us to bring our desires and needs to him in prayer.
 3. Of course, in telling us to make our requests *known* to God, Paul does not mean that God is not already aware of them.
 4. Making our requests known to God is simply a matter of us expressing our dependence upon him
- D. Paul also says that our prayers should be marked by thankfulness.
1. We need to cultivate gratitude in our hearts.
 2. The way to do this is by giving thought to the many things we should be thankful for, and then expressing our thanks verbally.
 3. Remember what Paul says in Romans 1 about those who were unthankful: "For although they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their foolish hearts were darkened." (Rom. 1:21)
 4. This leads one commentator to conclude that "Lack of gratitude is the first step to idolatry." [Fee, 409]
 5. Cultivating a thankful heart is something that helps us keep a proper perspective on life.
 6. It keeps us mindful of the extravagant nature of God's kindness and goodness to us in Christ.
 7. Thus, expressing our thanks to God will make us more and more joyful.

IV. A Peaceful Joy

- A. The final thing that this passage teaches us about Christian joy is that it is peaceful.
1. Paul says, “the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.”
 2. Notice that his is not a command, but a promise.
 3. This peace is not something that we are told to cultivate, but something that God will do for us.
 4. He will give us his peace.
 5. This is not like the false peace that is condemned in the book of Jeremiah, where God says of Israel’s false prophets and priests: “They have healed the wound of my people lightly, saying, ‘Peace, peace,’ when there is no peace.” (Jer. 6:14)
 6. The peace that Paul is talking about is not a human peace.
 7. It is not a matter of wishful thinking.
 8. It is the peace of God, the peace that surpasses human understanding.
 9. It is the peace that we have with God because of Christ’s reconciling work on our behalf.
- B. Paul says that this peace will guard our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.
1. Take note of the term “guard.”
 2. Our hearts and minds need to be guarded.
 3. We used to have worldly hearts and minds.

4. There is no need to guard a worldly heart and mind.
 5. But now that we have come to Christ, we have been given new hearts and new minds.
 6. And these renewed hearts and minds of ours are under constant assault.
 7. Listen to what the Puritan minister John Flavel has to say about a Christian's heart: "The heart of man is his worst part before it is regenerated, and the best afterward; it is the seat of principles, and the foundation of actions. The eye of God is, and the eye of the Christian ought to be, principally fixed upon it... The keeping and the right managing of the heart in every condition, is one great business of a Christian's life" [*Keeping the Heart*, 13]
 8. This is undoubtedly true.
 9. We need to guard our hearts, lest our love for Christ grow cold.
 10. And we need to guard our minds, lest they be conformed to the pattern of this world.
- C. However, as I said a moment ago, here in Philippians the guarding of our hearts and minds is not something that is commanded of us.
1. It is something that is promised to us.
 2. The Lord will guard our hearts and our minds by granting us his peace.
 3. That being said, this promise is immediately preceded by the command for us to let our requests be made known to God.
 4. God grants us his peace when we cast our burdens upon him.
 5. This shows us that the gifts that the Lord bestows upon us in Christ are things that we need to lay hold of by faith and by prayer.

6. John Calvin said it well when he wrote, "It is... by the benefit of prayer that we reach those riches which are laid up for us with the Heavenly Father... [N]othing is promised to be expected from the Lord, which we are not also bidden to ask of him in prayers."
[*Institutes*, 3.20.1]
 7. Is there something that you desire?
 8. Is there something that you need?
 9. Is there something that is troubling you?
 10. Bring these things to your heavenly Father in prayer.
 11. Bring them persistently.
 12. Bring them with a thankful heart.
 13. Bring them in faith.
 14. For as Jesus told us, "If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father who is in heaven give good things to those who ask him!" (Mt. 7:11)
- D. In describing Christian hearts and minds as guarded by the peace of God, Paul is evoking the image of how Roman garrisons guarded the colony of Philippi.
1. The peace of God is far more powerful than any source of human power, whether military, political, technological, or economic.
 2. God's peace transcends human understanding.
 3. This is why believers can enjoy it and rejoice in it even when our circumstances are tumultuous.

4. This is expressed in the opening lines of Psalm 46, where it says, "God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble. Therefore we will not fear though the earth gives way, though the mountains be moved into the heart of the sea" (vv. 1-2).
5. Our joy is unshakeable because we are "in Christ Jesus," and he himself is our peace.

V. Conclusion

- A. The people of the world try to free themselves from sadness and anxiety in all sorts of ways.
- B. They distract themselves with entertainment.
- C. They numb themselves with drugs.
- D. They gratify themselves with pleasure.
- E. The failure of these things is glaringly obvious.
- F. In spite of our society's great prosperity, there are many people in it who are extremely unhappy and exceedingly anxious.
- G. The reason why this is the case is because most people today see feeling good as the highest good.
- H. In other words, they make themselves into the end for which they exist.
- I. This is a burden that the human self is not designed to bear.
- J. As long as people embrace that mindset, they will never know lasting joy.
- K. But when you rest in the One by whom and for whom you were created, you truly can rejoice in the Lord always.

