

“Moving from Anxiety to Joy—Joy Hanging in the Balance”

Today we’re going to continue in this series of messages called “Moving from Anxiety to Joy.” To figure out how we can do this we’ve been looking at the book of Philippians in the Bible, one of the most loved books, because it’s dominant theme is joy.

So far, Paul has taught us that being a Christian should bring us joy! Being a follower of Jesus should bring us joy even in the face of hardship, even in the face of conflict. So, let me ask you, **have you ever known someone who was a Christian but never showed any kind of joy?** To me that’s a contradiction! I mean, how can someone who is a follower of the source of joy, be joyless? But honestly, some Christians I have known have seemed angry, and dour, and unhappy. In some cases I think that that attitude was just a reflection of how they saw God—as an angry and wrathful and judgmental kind of God.

But today as we look into the book of Philippians, we’ll see that there is a way to take hold of joy in your faith by carefully navigating the balance between two opposite extremes, two distortions of the faith. Let’s look at those distortions in the early church and how they might relate to our lives today.

There were two factions in early Christianity that Paul had trouble with. He struggled with the way they lived out the teachings of Jesus. The first faction was the **legalists**. In the early church they were known as the circumcision party. Man, that’s an oxymoron isn’t it! These were Jewish Christians—that’s what most of the early Christians were, Jewish. They believed that in addition to accepting Jesus Christ as your Lord and Savior, you, if you were a male, had to be circumcised and become a Jew first in order to become a Christian. And you, male or female, had to live by all of the Jewish laws and all the thousands upon thousands of rules and regulations that had been added to the law over the centuries. **Legalism is substituting rules for a relationship.**

For the legalists, the formula for salvation was this: **“Accepting Jesus Christ, his death and resurrection + All the works of the Law + Circumcision = Salvation”** Jesus Christ, his death and resurrection + all the works of the law + circumcision = salvation. That was a huge frustration for Paul! This formula infuriated him because he thought that it destroyed the essence of the Gospel. You see Paul believed that Jesus came to fulfill the law on our behalf. To fulfill the covenant that God had with ancient Israel and make a new covenant with his people.

That’s what Jesus said at the last supper, “This is my blood of the **new** covenant for you and for many for the forgiveness of sins...” He brought a new way to get right with God. A new formula, and it wasn’t through obeying an endless list of laws and rules that we could never keep. Instead, Jesus’ righteousness was credited to us; our sin was laid on him, and he took our punishment on the cross. For Paul, the formula for salvation was simple: **“Accepting Jesus Christ, his death and resurrection = Salvation”**

With this new covenant or contract with God we don’t have to earn our salvation or work our way into heaven. Instead we **receive** the gift of salvation and live our lives accordingly. You see, there’s a huge difference between trying to impress God by obeying a long list of laws and accepting the free gift of salvation by turning to Jesus.

Paul warned the early believers to watch out for these people who came preaching legalism—rules, regulation. Listen to what he says, **“Finally, my brothers and sisters, rejoice in the Lord...Beware of the dogs, beware of the evil workers, beware of those who mutilate the flesh...” (Philippians 3:1a-2, NRSV).** This is harsh stuff here! This was about the very essence of our faith. Paul is saying, “These people make me angry! I’m upset by what they are teaching. They are dangerous.” He was angry and frustrated because their teachings would rob these young Christians of their joy.

What’s sad is that we have a tendency to go back to that legalistic kind of Christianity. You see, it would be easy for me to stand up here and give you a list of things that you should and should not do. It would be easy for me to lead you to a rules-based faith. But all that would do is have you going through the motions of checking off the rules and regulations and finding yourself frustrated because you couldn’t quite achieve what I’m laying out for you to do. Pretty soon you find yourself feeling guilt, then shame, then frustration...but never joy.

The concern in that kind of faith is always wondering if you are living up to what God wants. Am I making God happy, am I doing it just right? The more rules and regulations you have, the more afraid of God you become, and the less joy you have in your faith.

Paul writes about how he had been there and done. He says, "I substituted rules for a relationship and it got me nowhere." He lists all his external efforts to try to win God's love. He lists his family heritage, he lists how he rigorously followed every law, every little rule, how he tried to eliminate Christianity because it threatened his faith. He lists all those external efforts and says they were worthless. He writes, "**What is more, I consider everything a loss compared to the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things. I consider them rubbish, that I may gain Christ...**" (Philippians 3:8, NIV).

Paul is saying that compared to knowing Christ Jesus personally, all those external efforts were rubbish. Rubbish. Just so we don't miss the point of how much Paul was railing against legalism, let's look at this word, "Rubbish." It comes from the Greek word *skubala*, everybody say *skubala* because you'll probably want to use this word again. *Skubala* can be translated one of two ways. One way, it simply means that which is thrown to the dogs, refuse, garbage, all this kind of stuff. The other way, the way that almost every Bible scholar will finally admit that it should be translated, is as "dung." Okay? Write that down.

Now, not just regular dung, but *skubala* was a slang word for dung. If your kid said *skubala* in the English version, you would wash your kid's mouth out with soap. Basically *skubala* is the equivalent of the S-bomb. I'm sorry if that offends you but that's what Paul said. All this outward stuff, this legalistic stuff, it is as *skubala*. Dung with a capital D, it is as the S bomb. It doesn't matter at all. That's a pretty aggressive thought, isn't it? Legalism, substituting rules for a relationship is the wrong way to go in your faith. Instead, Paul says, it's about knowing Jesus—being in a relationship with him, walking through life with him, talking to him, listening to him. Not just going through the motions, but knowing a Savior.

That's what I love about this place. We're not into rules-based religion. We're striving for a relationship with the living God. He's not looking for your works, first and foremost, he's looking for your heart.

But here's where we have to be very careful. Christian legalism is one distortion of the faith that was robbing people of their joy. But on the opposite side of the spectrum was **Christian libertinism**. Libertinism means taking freedom to an extreme. Christian libertines believed that **because** Jesus Christ had died for their sins, and **because** Jesus was all about grace and forgiveness, and they had accepted that grace and forgiveness. Because they were baptized and members of the church, God didn't really care what they did in their lives! They knew they couldn't earn salvation by their works, they couldn't earn their way into heaven, so they came to believe, "As long as I have a personal relationship with Jesus, I can do anything I want!"

Paul heard stuff like that and had to have said, "That's a bunch of *skubala* too!" Can you see how hard it must have been for Paul? He's trying to tell people that you're not saved by your works, but now he's having to address those who say, well it doesn't matter what I do! Almost every letter in the New Testament addresses this issue. In Paul's first letter to the church in Corinth (chapters 5 and 6) you see that in the city of Corinth there was sexual immorality of all kinds going on in that city. It was a city that was known around the world as an anything-goes sort of city. The people there were used to that way of living. And in the church in Corinth there was a group of Christians who were so proud of their freedom in Christ that they thought, "Since we're Christians and since we're made right with God through Jesus, it really doesn't matter what we do." They boasted about their sexual immorality! Including one man in the congregation who was having sex with his step-mother. They all knew about it and were sort of proud of it because there was liberty and freedom in Christ!

The Apostle Paul wrote to them and said, "I can't believe what you're doing and that you're actually proud of it! The gentiles and pagans don't even do that sort of thing! You have misunderstood the gospel if you don't understand that it **does** relate to how you live your lives." He goes on to address a common phrase in the Corinthian church. They were saying, "Everything is permissible for me now that I'm a Christian! I can do anything and it doesn't really matter!" Paul's response, "Everything may be permissible, but not everything is beneficial. Everything may be permissible, but there are some things that will turn you into slaves, so avoid

those things because they will hurt you!" So, no, you can't win God's favor by your works, but that doesn't mean anything goes!

The apostle James writes about this too. He was writing to Christians who were saying, "I'm not made right with God by my works, so when I see somebody who is hungry or in need, I don't need to do anything about that. I'll just say a prayer for them and God will take care of them." James responds to that way of thinking by saying, "**What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if you say you have faith but do not have works? Can faith save you? If a brother or sister is naked and lacks daily food, and one of you says to them, 'Go in peace; keep warm and eat your fill,' and yet you do not supply their bodily needs, what is the good of that? So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead**" (James 2:14-17, NRSV). Just like legalist faith has no joy, a deedless faith also lacks joy. It will rob you of your joy because you will begin to see and feel the disconnect between your baptism, your belief in Christ, and everything else.

This is where I have to challenge myself and you. To experience joy we have to build a connection between our faith and how we live our lives. And if you are lacking joy I have to ask, are you serving others? Is your life just about your own personal comfort? Is how you spend your time, your money, your mental and physical energy just about your own pleasure? If it is, you will not find joy. Yes, you can be a Christian and go heaven when you die, but if you're not connecting your faith to how you live your life you will not know joy.

What does this look like lived out? Jesus showed us by how he spent time with the down and out. He showed us in how he included those who had been discarded—lepers, prostitutes, tax collectors, people labeled as unforgiveable sinners. When was the last time you chose to be around someone you would not choose to be around? There was an elderly woman that I used to visit that I really didn't want to visit—she died a few years back. She was homebound, lonely and loved visitors, but could be mean and nasty and hateful. That was hard enough to deal with, but she also had a house full of cats, and each cat had a civilization of fleas on it. And on top of that she was a smoker. I would visit her regularly and I could always count on walking away a little berated, flea-bitten, covered in cat hair, and with a touch of black-lung.

I didn't visit her because I wanted to. I didn't visit her because it earned me points with God. I visited her because it seemed to be what Jesus would do, it seemed to be what he wanted me to do as I lived out my faith.

Are you choosing to be a servant? To somehow connect with people in poverty? To help people in need? To be there with those who are grieving? To be there with those who are down and out, not matter how they got there? Maybe you say, "I'm too busy?" Really? I would say, "Make the time." Maybe you say, "I'm afraid." I would say, "Feel the fear, and do it anyway." There is a vast sea of human need, will you choose to see it?

My point is that there needs to be a connection between our faith and how we live it out. But listen, the good works that you do, and the consistency between your faith and your daily life is not an attempt to win God's approval. You choose to ignore the poor, the grieving, the down and out and guess what—God is going to love you anyway! The good works that you do are an attempt to live up to what God has already given you! You see, God has **already** claimed you as his child in your baptism. He has made promises to you. He has loved you and given you his Holy Spirit. He has so much to give to you. His desire is that you live up to that. **He loves you even if you don't**, but his desire is that you live up to it.

Janet and I have a lot to learn as parents. With a 2 year old and a 9 year old we've got a lot of parenting ahead of us. But we have high hopes for our girls like every parent has high hopes for their kids. We want them to learn, and grow, and excel. Abby is potty training right now. We expect her to tell us when she needs to go potty. She's able to tell us that and she knows when it's time. But we're having a hard time because she still prefers to go in her pull-up. It doesn't really bother her at all. And pull-ups were not designed to hold a great deal of...*skubala* so lately we've had those days where the clothes have to be changed several times. She realizes what she's done. She hates having to change her clothes. When she has an accident we're understanding, but we let her know that she needs to tell us. It's a fine line between comforting her and letting her know it's not OK.

But what we want her to know is the bottom line is this: We love her. We love her when she makes it to the bathroom, and we love her when she doesn't! There is nothing she could do, no amount of accidents she could have, that would make us love her any less. But we have high expectations for her.

When she gets to school we will have high expectations too. We want both our girls to work hard and get good grades and excel. But we won't want them to do that because it will make us love them more. We want them to do it because it will help prepare them for other things in life. It will help them to succeed and accomplish their goals and be productive members of society and have joy in life. That's why we want them to work hard, not because we'll love them more if they gets straight A's. I won't love them any more if they get straight A's than if they gets straight C's. I'll be pleased and proud if they do, or if they did the best that they could, because I want the best for them. And applying themselves is what leads to that kind of life. The same thing is true of the relationship between God and you.

Another thing is this: I love my kids so much sometimes that it hurts. And every once in a while I want them to love me back. It means so much to have a two year old and a nine year old, spontaneously look up at you and say, "I love you, Daddy. I like being with you." And not because they want candy, just because they really mean it. Both girls are quite the talkers and I love sitting down and talking with them. And as they grow up I hope that continues. I'm realistic about the teen years, but the years before and after I hope they'll want to sit and visit with me.

You see, I think that's what God is looking for from you and me. God already loves you. There is nothing you could do to make him love you more than he loves you right now. But you can respond to that love. You can do your best to know God and know Jesus Christ intimately and personally. You can do your best to listen to the voice of the Holy Spirit whispering in your ear and follow the path that God lays out before you. You can pursue knowing him with all your heart, soul, mind and strength. You can love God with your head, and your heart and your hands. And in doing that, and living in that balance between grace and works, there you find joy.

Keeping that balance is always a challenge. But we are able to do it as we do our best to know God, to know Jesus. We do it as we make the commitment to be in worship. We keep that balance as we get involved in a study group, a small group, of some sort. We keep that balance as we keep our prayer lives vibrant and actively read God's word. We keep that balance as we strive to find ways to serve people who are down and out. Whatever you do as you leave today, pursue knowing Christ because there is where you find joy. And for today that is the Good News. In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

I thank Rev. Craig Groeschel Senior Pastor of Life Church and Rev. Adam Hamilton, Senior Pastor of the Church of the Resurrection, for their resources in this message.