

Joy in the Light / COB / 10.30.16

Introduction

- † **[1. joy image]** I know of two churches who taught Philippians in four weeks. It seemed reasonable to them: it is a short book, just four chapters, just four pages in the pew Bible.
- We, on the other hand, have had ten sermons on Philippians so far, and this is the fourteenth week since we started, and we are still in chapter two. We might never finish this book.
- † **[2. title]** We certainly will not finish today, because I want to talk with you about something else. I recently had a conversation, in which the other fellow raised a good question: why is it that sermons generally emphasize something you must do, instead of, say, focusing on helping people find joy? Think for a moment how you would answer that!
- My first thought is that his observation is incorrect: we do have sermons that help people find joy! My first sermon after getting hired was on the first twelve verses of 1 Peter, which is about how we can experience joy and peace even when life is hard.
 - We have studied God's promises about our salvation, God's grace and love that overcome our sinfulness and rebellion, the theology of Christ's return and his promise to deliver the earth from evil so we can have an eternity of joy and peace.
 - We have learned about who Jesus is, what he did for us on the cross, and what the Holy Spirit is miraculously doing to empower and equip us day by day.
 - All of these theological sermons result in strengthening our faith, our hope, our sense of peace, and our experience of joy.
 - **[3. 1 Peter 1.6-9]** Talking about the assurance of our salvation, Peter wrote [**1 Peter 1.6-9 NET**], **This brings you great joy, although you may have to suffer for a short time in various trials. Such trials show the proven character of your faith, which is much more valuable than gold—gold that is tested by fire, even though it is passing away— and will bring praise and glory and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed. You have not seen him, but you love him. You do not see him now but you believe in him, and so you rejoice with an indescribable and glorious joy, because you are attaining the goal of your faith— the salvation of your souls.**
 - Just knowing we are saved, and that we cannot lose that, should be enough to bring us joy!
- † **[4. 1 Peter 1.14-15]** My second thought is the theology of the Bible almost always leads to instruction about how we should respond to it, so often the promises come with commands, the inspiring truths come with sobering truths.
- My second sermon after being hired covered the next sixteen verses of 1 Peter, where he gives us five ways we should respond to the theology at the start of the letter.
 - For example, **1 Peter 1.14-15 NET: Like obedient children, do not comply with the evil urges you used to follow in your ignorance, but, like the Holy One who called you, become holy yourselves in all of your conduct...**
 - God's truths should bring us joy, but they also should inspire us to follow Christ into holiness.

- † **[5. cross light]** My third thought is that we should never disconnect the idea of joy from the idea of doing what God wants. Think about this . . .
- Who designed people? God. Who created people? God. In whose image were people made? God. Who designed *you*, created *you*, and made *you* in his image? God.
 - So who would have the best idea about what kind of life was likely to bless you? God. In the past three years, we have seen that God, through scripture, has provided us with extensive guidance, from how to handle persecution to how to encourage a friend; from how to find joy while suffering to how to help others who are grieving; from how to protect ourselves from spiritual attack to how to grow spiritually; from how to use spiritual gifts to how to use our money; from how to find contentment to how to keep our zest for life.
 - **[6. Proverbs 10.8]** We would be fools to ignore God's instruction! In fact, the fool in the Bible's wisdom literature is the person who ignores God's revelation, rather living by flawed human reasoning. **Proverbs 10.8 NIV: The wise in heart accept [God's] commands, but a chattering fool comes to ruin.**
 - I want to talk more about this today: finding joy by walking in God's light, walking with God.

Blessing by Walking with God

- † **[7. Genesis 1]** Most of you have seen these three circles before. God is the only being who has existed eternally in the past. He created everything; he is the sole creator.
- **Genesis 1.26-28 NET: Then God said, "Let us make humankind in our image, after our likeness, so they may rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air, over the cattle, and over all the earth, and over all the creatures that move on the earth." God created humankind in his own image, in the image of God he created them, male and female he created them. God blessed them and said to them, "Be fruitful and multiply! Fill the earth and subdue it! Rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air and every creature that moves on the ground."**
 - **[8. three circles]** We are God's creatures, what he created. If God created us, and God is so powerful that he created the entire universe simply by speaking, who should be in charge of the world and of life, God or us? God; he's on top.
 - But we are special, because God created us and only us in his own image, and that means God created us with a sense of purpose. We are to reflect his character, represent him in life, reproduce his image by raising up children to walk with him and through multiplying discipleship, and we are to rule as his stewards over the earth, the resources he has given us.
 - Sounds good. What's the problem? Sin. God designed us, created us, to walk with him. If we rebel against him, if we do something against his will or against his character, can we be said in that moment to be reflecting his character? No. Would we in that moment be representing him well? No. So when we turn away from God by acting against his will or against his character, we are sinning, we are failing at our purpose and disobeying God.
 - **[9. John 8]** **John 8.12 NET: Then Jesus spoke out again, "I am the light of the world. The one who follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life."**
 - **[10. 1 John 1]** **1 John 1.6-7 NET: If we say we have fellowship with him [God] and yet keep on walking in the darkness, we are lying and not practicing the truth. But if we walk in the light**

as he himself is in the light, we have fellowship with one another and the blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin.

- **[11. Ephesians 5]** Ephesians 5.8-10 NET: for you were at one time darkness, but now you are light in the Lord. [That’s our encouraging theology; now here comes the resulting command.] **Walk as children of the light– for the fruit of the light consists in all goodness, righteousness, and truth– trying to learn what is pleasing to the Lord.**
 - This isn’t just about not murdering people, it also is about sharing the gospel with people; it is not just about not stealing, it also is about giving and serving in the church; it is not just about learning not to lie or watch porn, it also is about learning to teach and mentor as part of the ministry team. Those of you who don’t like that don’t have an argument with me, you have an argument with God.
 - We always have this fundamental choice: will we walk with God and live his way, or will we walk apart from God and live a different way, what we think of as our own way? It is always sin if we are walking apart from God’s will and character, turning toward darkness.
 - **[12. Psalms 119]** So where do we learn about God’s character and will for us? The Bible, God’s revelation. **Psalms 119.105, 133 NIV: Your word is a lamp for my feet, a light on my path... Direct my footsteps according to your word; let no sin rule over me.** This is a prayer we all should pray!
- † **[13. joy image]** In life, we have an amazing number of paths we could take, don’t we? Rachel and Eric are in college right now; they could study to pursue any of thousands of different professions. Even an old fellow, like me, can transition from being a banker to being a pastor.
- We live in a time and place of unprecedented opportunity. In the whole history of the world, there has never been anything like it! We can change jobs, we can move from Florida to PA, we can buy and sell property, we can choose to pursue hobbies, most of us have so much choice and freedom that we can shape our lives into whatever we want.
 - And even those who are more limited by their past choices – good or bad – even each of them get to decide each day what kind of person they will be, what priorities they will have, what beliefs and attitudes they will hold.
- † **[14. top line]** Yet I would say there really are only two paths on most decisions: we can do things God’s way or we can do things man’s way. You have seen this graphic many times, if you have been here. I call it “Top-line / Bottom-line.” It’s a visual of what we are discussing: we have an essential choice; we can choose to walk in the light with God or to walk in the darkness apart from God.
- You can pursue your fleshly goals with your fleshly methods. We call this “walking on the bottom-line.” Think about this: If your goals are not the goals that God has for you, can they really be best for you? No. You might be deceived such that you think those goals are best for you – you want those things, you might think you need those things – but if God’s will for you is different, who do you think is likely to know what is right and best, the God who designed and created you or the creature corrupted in nature by sin? I would say, God.
 - Even when our goals are good, we might be tempted to achieve them in the wrong way. A parent might steal to provide for the children; the unemployed might exaggerate or lie on the resume to get a job. If you are pursuing something good, is it still sin if you go about it the wrong way? yes. God’s biblical instruction is to do the right thing and trust him with the results.

- **[15. Deuteronomy 5]** Moses taught the Israelites an example of this: **Deuteronomy 5.32-33 NIV: So be careful to do what the LORD your God has commanded you; do not turn aside to the right or to the left. Walk in obedience to all that the LORD your God has commanded you** [that's how they could do what was right], **so that** [here's the promise they needed to trust] **you may live and prosper and prolong your days in the land that you will possess.**
 - **[16. top line]** Now think about this. If the goal is “good,” in that it is something God would want for you, would you need to use sinful ways to achieve it? or – given that God desires it for you – would you be able to trust he would give it to you if you walked on the straight and narrow? If it truly is a goal God has for you, you can trust that he will empower you to achieve it without using wrong methods.
 - So the bottom line is sinful: it involves pursuing something not in God's will or it involves pursuing it in ways that are against God's will or character.
- † The other choice is to “walk on the top-line.” Rather than relying on your own human reasoning, on the top-line you are living by faith and obedience to God's revelation.
- In every situation, you do what is right and trust God with the consequences. You might be tempted to cheat, lie, steal, lust, or even murder that person who has become an obstacle, but you resist and continue walking with God.
- † What's the risk in that? What keeps us from taking the top-line? Part of it is pride: we want control and we don't want to submit.
- When God first created people, he gave them some instructions and he promised to take care of everything else. But Adam and Eve sinned, because they did not want to obey the instructions and they did not want to just trust God with the results, with everything else.
 - We are the same way. Deep down, we don't like being a creature, we don't like being a slave of Christ; we want to determine our own path, on the bottom line. And we want God to bless our choice, our decision, even though the path we chose represents sinful rebellion! But we will see in a moment, that isn't what happens, even if we get what we want.
 - If you resent biblical instruction about how to live, that is your determination to live on the bottom line. You get to make that choice, but don't be surprised when you find yourself discontent instead of joyful.
- † Another part of the problem is we don't really trust God. We don't. We might trust God with eternity, but we don't really trust him in this life.
- On the top line we have to do the right thing and trust God with the results; but what's the issue? God doesn't always give us what we want! Sometimes God says “no” to our goals; sometimes he makes us wait and wait; sometimes he makes us jump through hoops before the blessing comes.
 - The typical fleshly response to someone who tells us “no,” “wait,” or “jump” is to flip them off, but what happens if you flip off God? You are no longer walking on the top-line with him, instead you are pursuing your goal, your way, on the bottom line.
- † **[17. Proverbs 10.23]** Another part of the problem is we are ignorant and corrupt. **Proverbs 10.23 NIV: A fool finds pleasure in wicked schemes** [you might not think your goal, your method, is

wicked, but you know what? if it's not God's will, it is wicked!], **but a person of understanding delights in [God's] wisdom.**

- We are ignorant in that we don't really know God's Word. How can it guide us, how can it protect us from straying into sin, if we don't know it, if we have not read all of it ever, if we have not studied it over and over, if we have not memorized important summary verses? The answer is, "it cannot." And the thing is, God's instruction often is counter-intuitive to our flesh; in other words, it does not make sense to our flesh at first, so we rarely come to the right decision without God's Word guiding us.
- In our corruption, we are astoundingly successful at self-deception and rationalization. You don't have to be a Christian to know this is true, every parent can see it in their children, every boss in their employees, not just every pastor in his congregation.
- And sometimes we are just weak, aren't we? We feel tempted, so we fall. The more we are used to falling, the more we sin over and over, the weaker we become.
- Some people might not realize porn is a sin, having never read the Bible; but even if they do feel conviction in their conscience, they might look anyway, because they are weak. Or they might rationalize and deceive themselves, saying, "I can watch this movie, it won't be so bad"; or "I don't need controls on my internet, I won't watch the bad stuff"; or "God accepts that I am not perfect"; "God will forgive me, so I don't need to worry about it." Thus we often take the bottom line, even if we go to church on Sundays and seem like pretty good people.

† **[18. top-line]** So what? Why should we aspire to walk the top-line?

- One reason is that God knows what is best for us. It makes sense to live his way, because he designed us for a certain way of life. He knows what will not just please us temporarily, but give us lasting fulfilment, contentment, peace, and joy. We chase after our get-rich / get-happy quick schemes on the bottom line and miss out on the blessings inherent in God's way of life.
- **Galatians 5.16-17 NET: But I say, live by the Spirit and you will not carry out the desires of the flesh. For the flesh has desires that are opposed to the Spirit, and the Spirit has desires that are opposed to the flesh, for these are in opposition to each other, so that you cannot do what you want.** After reviewing the terrible results of being led by our fleshly [bottom line] impulses, Paul continued in **Galatians 5.22-23 NET: But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.** Where is the joy, walking in the flesh or by the Spirit? By the Spirit.

† A second reason to take the top line is that there are blessings we get when walking with God which are not available to us when we do not.

- Some of those blessings are worldly, physical in nature. If we take the bottom line, we might get what we want, what we think will make us happy; but if we take the top line, we get the worldly blessings God knows are best for us. Again, whose judgement are you going to trust, that of the perfect Creator or that of the flawed creature?
- **[19. Romans 8.6]** Some of those blessings are spiritual in nature. **Romans 8.6 NIV: The mind governed by the flesh is death, but the mind governed by the Spirit is life and peace.**
- When you are walking with God, you have a greater realization of the fruit of the Spirit, God's help enduring trials, strengthened faith, spiritual growth, preparation to handle life and do God's work, success inspiring others with your example, uninterrupted intimacy with God,

treasure in heaven, greater enlightenment about God and his perspectives, success resisting temptation. When you turn away from God to walk in your own ways on the bottom line, you also turn away from all that. You do not lose your salvation, but you turn away from God in relationship and force the Holy Spirit to focus on your repentance.

- † **[20. Proverbs 14.12]** A third reason to always take the top line is that there are real effects of sin, even in the believer: **Proverbs 14.12 NET: There is a way that seems right to a person, but its end is the way that leads to death.**
- If you choose to walk in spiritual darkness, you choose to take the path that leads to physical and spiritual death, and you will experience sin's effects. Those effects include corrective action from God to bring you back in repentance, deception of the mind and hardening of the heart, spiritual bondage to sin, physical illness, a loss of heavenly treasure, and negative effects on other people, including a weaker testimony for Christ.
 - **[21. Hebrews 3.12-13]** **Hebrews 3.12-13 NIV: See to it, brothers and sisters, that none of you has a sinful, unbelieving heart that turns away from the living God. But encourage one another daily, as long as it is called "Today," so that none of you may be hardened by sin's deceitfulness.**
 - So we need to choose the top line, to walk with God, in his light, to experience the best that life has to offer. The way to experience peace and joy is to walk with God, to learn how to live his way and then pursue that way of life with abandon.
- † **[22. Luke 11.28]** So going beyond an individual decision, let's generalize this for choosing a way of life: we can use the Bible and the church to learn how to walk in God's ways on the top-line; or we can continue on the path we feel instinctively in the flesh and have learned in our culture, of walking on the bottom-line. Which is likely to bring us the greatest joy in the long-run?
- That's why sermons often tell you what to do. The gospel promise of salvation leads to theological truths which lead to commands. The commands explain how we live for God, how we live worthy of the gospel, how we love God and each other correctly, how we stay safely in the light, in God's will, walking with him. Jesus said in **Luke 11.28 NET: "Blessed ... are those who hear the word of God and obey it!"**
 - The words "obey" and "obedience" sound ugly to our ears, because of our sinful hearts. If it helps, think instead of walking with God, walking in the light, following Christ, putting yourself in the care of God's hands. Only walking with God by faith and obedience brings us the maximum blessing, including transcendent joy!
- † **[23. John 15]** There are churches that will try to help you feel good by filling your head with new age positive thinking. If you go there, you are just deceiving yourselves, whitewashing over your problems, and – worst of all! – missing out on the solutions that God provides in scripture!
- **John 15.10-11 NET: Jesus said, "If you obey my commandments, you will remain in my love, just as I have obeyed my Father's commandments and remain in his love. I have told you these things so that my joy may be in you, and your joy may be complete."**
 - If we can learn to walk on the top line in faith and obedience, in the light, by dying to our self-interest and living for Christ, then we can experience unity with the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, we can experience intimacy with them, we can experience freedom from the power of sin, and all this will bring us joy. We can find joy in the light of Christ. Let's pray . . .