



Galatians 5:22-23

In 2017, two happiness experts teamed up to document the world's ten most joyful travel destinations. They called their project The Joy Index. Their thesis is that travel makes us happy. Planning a trip, the experiences we have away from home, the awe and wonder of a new, beautiful place, and even the trip back home can all increase our levels of happiness. Granted, they were writing before Covid, and a few things have changed since then, but they still stand by their work. Among their ten most joyful travel destinations are Madagascar, Shanghai, Bordeaux, the Big Island of Hawaii, Telluride (CO), and Houston, Texas.¹

I have never been to Houston, so I can't speak to the joy that this city does or does not bring. And while some of you may write this list off altogether at the thought of Houston being one of the most joyful travel destinations in the world, my interest is a bit piqued. Still, I am probably going to Telluride before I check out Houston.

What allows us to experience joy in life? As these happiness experts were putting together this list, they had several research-based criteria for evaluating which destinations truly bring the most joy. They talk about the weather, social connection, culture (such as food, music, and art), and a sense of wonder and adventure. Are they right? What truly brings joy in life? We are going to explore that question together this morning.

Joy is the second character quality that appears in Galatians 5:22-23 in what the Apostle Paul calls the fruit of the Spirit. Last week, we looked at love, which sits at the beginning of the list and is the supreme virtue in the list.

This week, we are going to look at joy. Alongside love and along with peace (which we will look at next week), joy is meant to be one of the primary markers of those who follow Jesus. Love, joy, and peace are right at the center of life in the kingdom of God.

And yet, joy can be elusive. A recent article on CNN claims that happiness in America is at a record low.² Is that the case for you?

Everyone wants to experience joy. Both Christians and non-Christians alike think that joy is a good thing. We all want to be happy. And yet, collectively, we are more depressed, anxious, angry, discouraged, and dissatisfied than we used to be.

So how do we find joy? How do we experience more joy in our lives? That's the question that we are going to consider together this morning. As we do, I want to remind us what the fruit of the Spirit are really about.

Joy: command and result

When thinking about the fruit of the Spirit, we must remind ourselves this is not a list of commands. The Apostle Paul does not say, "Be more loving. Be more joyful. Be more peaceful," as if it were our job to cultivate these things in ourselves. No. Remember, these virtues, these character qualities, are the fruit of the Spirit—that is, they are the result of the work of God in our lives. The idea here is that our job is to walk by the Spirit—to depend on the Spirit—so that the Spirit can bring about these virtues in our lives so that the Spirit can transform our character into the character of Jesus. We cannot change ourselves. Only God can change us.

Yet, the strange thing when it comes to this list is that, as we look at what the Bible says about these various virtues, we are, in fact, commanded to do these things. We are going to see this with joy this morning. Throughout Scripture, joy is talked about both as a *result* of walking with the Spirit (i.e., something that God does) and as a *command* (i.e., something we must do). If joy is a command, then the cultivation of joy is not merely a passive event. It is also an active decision that we must make. So God changes us, but we also have a role to play.

The danger in all of this, however, is that we would begin to read the fruit of the Spirit as a list of goals for Christian living. But this is not a list of goals. The point of life in the Spirit is to be connected to God by the Spirit. The main thing we are after is to be in relationship with God through his Son, Jesus. Through this relationship, we will become more like Jesus as we learn to open to the work of the Spirit in our lives.

So, with that, I want to look at a few verses together this morning as we consider how we might experience more joy in our lives.

Rejoice in the Lord

First, let's look at Philippians 4. When it comes to joy, the book of Philippians is one of the best places to go. Joy is a major theme in this book, which is incredible because Paul writes it from prison. Even in prison, Paul is full of joy.

Philippians 4:4:

Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, rejoice.

This is a command to be joyful. It is a command to be joyful *always*. That's a tall order and one that we will probably never realize in this life. And yet, we can be joyful more often than we might think. The key here, and the first step to experiencing more joy, is to rejoice *in the Lord*.

Taking a trip to Houston might bring you an incredible amount of joy. Or maybe not! Taking a trip to Madagascar might bring you an incredible amount of joy. Or maybe not. Even if it does, here is the problem. Eventually, you are going to come back home. And you will go back to work, and your manager will be on your case about something. You will get to the end of your semester, and the stress of finals will set in. You will get home from your trip, and the cancer will remain. The student loans will still be there. The problems in your marriage will still be there. And you might feel the joy fade as quickly as it came.

The temptation here is to start planning the next trip so we can experience joy again. But Paul says no. True joy is not found in our circumstances. True joy is not found in a vacation, a new car or a relationship. True joy is found in the Lord. If we want to be joyful, we must learn to take our eyes off our circumstances and place them on the Lord. To remind ourselves of who God is and what he has done for us. God is the all-powerful creator of the universe who loves you and me more than we will ever understand. Now, if we have placed our faith in him, we are fully forgiven of all of our sins. We are fully accepted by God, adopted into his family as his children. We have been given his Spirit to live inside us so that we might truly be alive. This is what God has done for us, and this is what we need to set our eyes on if we are going to experience joy.

But the command to rejoice in the Lord is about something more as well. To rejoice "in the Lord" can also mean to rejoice "*by means of* the Lord." That is, to rejoice through the supernatural power that the Spirit provides. And we need this so badly, don't we? Sometimes, we just can't bring ourselves to rejoice. No matter how hard we try to remind ourselves of all that is ours in Christ—of all the reasons we have to experience joy in the Lord—sometimes we just can't get there. That is because we aren't meant to be able to get there on our own. We need the power of God in our lives to create joy in us when we can't seem to find it for the life of us.

So we pray. We ask God to give us the supernatural gift of joy. This is what it is to rejoice in the Lord.

Practice gratitude

Another way to cultivate joy is modeled for us in Psalm 100. Psalm 100 is a psalm of thanksgiving. This is a song for corporate worship.

**Make a joyful noise to the Lord, all the earth!
Serve the Lord with gladness!
Come into his presence with singing!**

**Know that the Lord, he is God!
It is he who made us, and we are his;
we are his people, and the sheep of his
pasture.**

**Enter his gates with thanksgiving,
and his courts with praise!
Give thanks to him; bless his name!**

This song of corporate worship begins with a call to joy: Make a joyful noise to the Lord! This is part of what we want to do when we gather for worship. We want to sing joyfully to the Lord. That is not the only thing we do in worship. There also need space for lament. But we also need to sing for joy! We need to come before the Lord with gladness — with happiness! Sometimes we try to draw a distinction between joy and happiness—like it is possible to be joyful without being happy—but Scripture doesn't seem to draw any such distinction. When we are joyful, we feel happy. We are glad. That's what Psalm 100 is about.

Notice how the psalm would have us cultivate joy. It gives us two ways. The first is the same thing we saw in Philippians 4: rejoice in the Lord. That's what the psalmist is doing when he says, Know that the Lord, he is God. He made us. We are his. Because of who God is and what he has done to redeem us, we can have joy. That is rejoicing in the Lord.

The second way to cultivate joy comes in verse 4: “Enter his gates with thanksgiving. Give thanks to him and bless his name.”

If we want to become more joyful in our worship or more joyful in life, we need to learn to practice gratitude. This is the second way to cultivate joy—practice gratitude.

To practice gratitude is to intentionally notice the gifts of God in your life—the grace of God in your life—and to tell him *thank you*. And the gifts of God are everywhere if we take the time to notice them.

A few weeks ago, someone challenged me to spend time contemplating beauty. I went on a hike with a friend and just tried to notice—to attend to—the beauty of nature. I love spending time in nature, and I’m often amazed by God’s beauty, power, and creativity. But as I took time to look for beauty wherever I could intentionally, I was amazed at what I saw. Have you ever noticed how many shades of green you encounter on a 2-hour hike? I saw dozens of shades of green—sage green, mint green, dusty forest green, bright lime green. I had no idea there were so many shades of green all around me until I started looking for them.

At one point on the hike, I saw a lone plant growing out of the middle of the trail. It was rugged, breaking through the hard-packed clay. It was thorny, and tough-looking, like it knew how to take care of itself. A delicate, pink flower with a bright yellow centre at the top of the plant, above 12 inches off the ground. If I had not been intentionally looking for beauty around me, I would probably have walked right past this flower. But instead, I stopped. I took it in. And I gave God thanks for the beauty in front of me.

This is the way it is with God’s grace in our lives. We can go about life, caught up in the hustle and bustle, and be completely unaware of most of God’s gracious gifts to us. But if we slow down enough to *notice*, we begin to see that God’s grace is everywhere. A kind comment from a coworker. A bedtime hug from our kids. The warmth of the sun on our faces. An encouraging text from a friend. The beauty of the hills as you drive along Highway 280. All of this is God’s grace—gifts from the Lord to remind us that he is with us and loves us.

To practice gratitude is to pay attention to these gifts and give thanks to God for them as you do. This practice of gratitude has the inevitable consequence of increasing our joy. We naturally become more joyful

when we express thanks to God for all he has done for us. We need to learn to practice gratitude.

Stay connected to Jesus

I said earlier that joy is both a command and a result. We are commanded to rejoice on the one hand, and we are also told that joy results from learning to walk by the Spirit. Rejoicing in the Lord and practicing gratitude both fall more on the side of the command part of joy. Now, I want to look at another passage that focuses on joy as a result of walking with God.

We looked at John 15 a few weeks ago as we explored the metaphor of the vine and the branches. I want to take us back there to see what we can learn about joy.

John 15:4-5 (Jesus says):

Abide in me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit by itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in me. I am the vine; you are the branches. Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing.

This is a metaphor for connection. Jesus says I am the vine. You are the branches. If you want to bear fruit, your job is to stay connected to me, and through that connection—through my life that flows through you—you will bear fruit. To hammer the point home, Jesus makes the nearly outrageous statement, “apart from me you can do nothing.” This statement always stops me in my tracks. It is practically unbelievable. When it comes to bearing fruit—especially the fruit of the Spirit—we can do nothing apart from Jesus. Really? Doesn’t it seem like we can do something? Weren’t we just talking about what we can do to grow in joy? How can Jesus say that we can’t bear anything fruit apart from him? We are going to come back to that in a moment. First, look at what Jesus says just a few verses later.

John 15:11:

These things I have spoken to you, that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be full.

Of all the fruit of the Spirit, joy is the one that Jesus wants to talk about here. Notice what Jesus says. He has said these things—about the vine and the branches and bearing fruit—so that *his joy* might be in us, and our joy might be *full*.

Do you want to experience more joy in life? Do you want a joy that is full? Stay connected to Jesus. This is really what it all comes down to. Stay connected to Jesus. He is the vine. We are the branches. If you want to bear fruit—if you want to experience true, lasting, and full joy in your life—stay connected to Jesus because any and all joy that we experience in life is actually his joy in us.

Now, you might be saying, *wait a minute. Are you saying that only Christians can experience joy?* That only Christians can be happy? No, absolutely not. Plenty of people who don't know Jesus experience some level of joy. But, whatever level of joy they do experience, that joy also comes from Jesus. They might not know it, but every ounce of joy ever experienced by a person is actually the joy of the Lord inside of them.

Theologians make a distinction between common grace and special grace. Common grace is available to everyone through creation. Special grace is only available through a relationship with Jesus. All of this grace ultimately comes from God, but common grace is available to those who don't even know God. Gandhi was an incredibly joyful person, but he didn't have the life of God in him. What Jesus is saying in John 15 is that Gandhi could not be joyful if not for him. Apart from Jesus, Gandhi could do nothing. And yet, there is another level of joy, a depth of joy that is available to those of us who give our lives to Jesus. Our role in accessing this joy is to stay connected to Jesus. To plant ourselves in him. To sink our roots deep in him so that his joy might flow through our veins and our joy might be full.

How is your joy?

How is your level of joy this morning? In a room this size, I know that there are a variety of different answers to that question. For some of us, we are experiencing that full joy that Jesus is talking about, which is awesome. Praise God for that! My prayer for you is that you would allow that joy to propel you deeper into relationship with Jesus, and you would continue to sink your roots deeper in him.

For others, we are experiencing joy, but it seems half-full at best. It comes, and it goes, and we aren't sure why. I have a feeling that many of us are in this place today. If that's you, my prayer is that you might be able to explore this with the Lord. Talk to the Lord about your joy. What

is it that really brings you joy? Are you rejoicing in the Lord, or are you rejoicing in something else? God be with you as you explore this with him.

I know some of us here this morning haven't felt true joy in a long time—maybe ever. Depression and despair seem like closer friends than do joy and happiness. My prayer for you this morning is that you could share these feelings with the Lord and know that you are loved by him and not alone. He is with you. He knows you. He loves you. And he wants to fill you with his joy.

For the joy set before him

For all of us here this morning, there is one more thing that I want you to hear. You bring joy to Jesus. You make Jesus happy.

Hebrews 12:2:

... looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God.

For the joy set before him, Jesus endured the cross. Do you know what that joy was? It was you. It was me. It was the thought of being with us for all of eternity. That joy is what sent Jesus to the cross. Though he was innocent, he died the death of a criminal. He bore our sin and guilt. He defeated death so that he could live with us forever. You bring joy to Jesus.

Endnotes

1. Cassie Shortsleeve, "The Joy Index," *Condé Nast Traveler*. <https://www.cntraveler.com/thejoyindex>.
2. Harry Enten, "American happiness hits record lows," *CNN* (February 2, 2022). <https://www.cnn.com/2022/02/02/politics/unhappiness-americans-gallup-analysis/index.html>.