



Roanoke, Virginia  
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## ***“Moral Joy”***

*Philippians 2:1-11*

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I often wait until I'm into the sermon to read the scripture lesson, but today I'll be way into it before reading our passage from Philippians. Be patient.

### **Prayer for Illumination:**

Holy God, we ask to hear your Word. Help us hear its joy, even with the difficulty and pain that joy often contains. Amen.

Prosperity Gospel is not Gospel.

Well, maybe there can be a version that speaks of *spiritual* prosperity and life finding its fullness in God that can get my head nodding in agreement. But I am speaking of the Prosperity Gospel you often hear from famous and wealthy preachers of mega-churches. They may say a lot of good and inspiring things with which I could agree, but I am speaking to two promises they often make. While it is hard to argue against their effectiveness in increasing membership and revenue, there are two promises made *in the name of Christ* that *Christ himself did not make*.

First, they promise—or used to promise when building their ministries and fortunes—financial prosperity for those who are generous in giving to the pastor's church or ministry. The preacher's wealth is presented as evidence that the promise holds true. I saw an interview with Joyce Myers where she came right out and said that the mansions, jet, luxury cars, and expensive



boat—owned either by her or provided by her ministry—are evidence of God blessing those who bless God.<sup>1</sup>

Financial prosperity was not promised by Jesus. Sure, there is a psychology of generosity that makes sense. Generosity and financial planning often go hand in hand, and one reason is that generous people would like to be more generous in the future. Also, I know there are folks who are good at leveraging gifts where giving is a sort of investment to gain access or swing deals—and I'm not even criticizing that if someone is helped and no one is harmed—but most of us don't have those kind of resources or opportunities to even worry about it. Again, speaking for the Gospel, financial prosperity is not an assured blessing that comes of obedience, faith, and giving.

I think most who are here in the sanctuary or joining online understand that. But the second promise made by the Prosperity Gospel is more subtle, sounds more reasonable, and can be more seductive for people like me. The second promised benefit of faith is happiness. The promise is seductive because it easily attaches itself to what needs to be said about faith and the church... if the church is acting anything like the body of Christ it is called to be.

We in the church speak of scriptures that tell of blessings coming to those who know their need for God. We speak of the

- God of Exodus who hears the cries of slaves and delivers them,
- the God of Deuteronomy who, in a patriarchal age, cares for widows, orphans and sojourners—those who are the most vulnerable and the easiest to abandon ignore or exploit;
- the God of the Gospels; the God who in Christ feeds the hungry, heals the cripple, forgives the sinner, and promises a coming day when all will be reconciled;
- the God of Paul who promises salvation... from sins, from death;
- and the God of the Psalms who calls us to rejoice, give thanks and praise, and know the joy of our salvation.

It doesn't seem like all that much of a jump in Gospel logic to think that a God like that *makes us happy*.

- Don't you think the slaves were happy when they were delivered from bondage?
  - Only then we remember the long years in the wilderness where they had to learn lessons of freedom is often hard and painful ways.
- Don't you think that the woman who was saved by Jesus from being stoned for her sins was happy?
  - And then we remember Jesus telling her to sin no more because life was going to remain a challenge.
- Don't you think that those who heard God's voice and were called by him were happy?
  - And then we remember what the prophets endured, and the difficulties faced by the disciples.

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<sup>1</sup> I do not remember specifically what was referenced in the interview. A google search provided the details of these goods.



- Don't you think Paul was happy when he spoke of joy?
  - And then we remember he wrote from prison and eventually was executed.

I am not saying that happiness and faith are mutually exclusive. I often am happy *because* of my faith—

Happy because  
 of how it shaped my family life;  
 how it shaped my identity;  
 how it provided me with you, a community that cares about me;  
 how it gave me hope and gratitude.

And many, many, times I've had a blast at church.

But as much as I have wanted it to be true—

especially as a child who wanted all life to be like my best times  
 at play,  
 or with family,  
 or being successful at something and being applauded,  
 or even at church when worship caused my spirit to sing,  
 or study brought an insight that thrilled me.

it just isn't in the cards for us always to be happy.

There is nothing wrong with being happy in and of itself,  
 but there is also nothing wrong with being *unhappy* in and of itself.

The Gospel doesn't promise happiness. The promise is for a life with God, and that comes with an "Uh oh!" as much as an "Oh boy!"

Sometimes being unhappy is a gift of God. Being unhappy is a necessary and healthy state of being so something  
 can heal,  
 or be learned,  
 or be surrendered.

We grieve when we lose a loved one,  
 or when some dream has to be abandoned  
 or some assumption about how life is supposed to be has to be dropped.

Bad things happen to people we care about,  
 and sometimes between people who care for each other.

It is certainly OK if news of natural disaster  
 or evidence of something broken in our community  
 gets us upset.

Being unhappy plays an important role in emotional growth and mental health.

Perhaps the cruelty of the false promise of happiness is felt most by



- those who feel they have failed because they have not achieved some kind of expected standard of bliss—say in their marriage;
- or it has taken longer than others tell them it should take to get over a loss,
- or maybe they simply struggle with what 10% of adult Americans struggle with each year: depression.

When happiness is the promised blessing of faith,  
then being unhappy is just one more thing to feel guilty about.

Here's the problem: We speak of God's blessings, and then we confuse "happiness" with what the Bible calls "Joy." They are not the same.... at least as far as scripture is concerned. In the general worldview of the Bible, happiness is an emotion contained to the individual. The circumstances of the moment suit what that person wants. In this way,  
even Nazis could be happy—  
even abusers can be happy—  
even those who scam the elderly of their money can be happy.  
because as an emotion, happiness can be felt by anyone.

I say this fully aware of the studies that statistically show a positive relationship between virtue and happiness. These studies back up the claim that those who on average live in a way they believe is right or good are more often happy than those who on average live in a way they believe is wrong. Shame, guilt, and regret eventually weigh on most people—  
maybe not the narcissist,  
but most people—  
and over time can degrade one's ability to be happy.

But I am saying that because happiness is a human emotion, everyone can experience it. Sometimes, the biggest grin can be seen on the face of evil.

Joy, as the Bible presents it, is different because it is not an emotion. It is something more transcendent, and thus more difficult for me to describe. I would even say that it is more spiritual because

- it is something shared with others,
- it cannot be captured in a moment but flows,
- something that is known in the journey even more than at the destination,
- and it is something where the delight comes because of sensing some greater good.

The novelist J. D. Salinger tried to paint a picture of the difference by describing  
happiness as a solid  
and joy as a liquid.

An artist might describe joy



as the beauty of a symphony that includes discordant notes,  
or the beauty of the painting where the shadows are as essential as the light.

Or let's consider how Paul might describe. Listen to our passage and listen for how Paul speaks of "Joy."

Philippians 2:1-11

If, then, there is any comfort in Christ, any consolation from love, any partnership in the Spirit, any tender affection and sympathy, <sup>2</sup> make my joy complete: be of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. <sup>3</sup> Do nothing from selfish ambition or empty conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. <sup>4</sup> Let each of you look not to your own interests but to the interests of others. <sup>5</sup> Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus,

<sup>6</sup> who, though he existed in the form of God,  
did not regard equality with God  
as something to be grasped,  
<sup>7</sup> but emptied himself,  
taking the form of a servant,  
assuming human likeness.  
And being found in appearance as a human,  
<sup>8</sup> he humbled himself  
and became obedient to the point of death—  
even death on a cross.  
<sup>9</sup> Therefore God exalted him even more highly  
and gave him the name  
that is above every other name,  
<sup>10</sup> so that at the name given to Jesus  
every knee should bend,  
in heaven and on earth and under the earth,  
<sup>11</sup> and every tongue should confess  
that Jesus Christ is Lord,  
to the glory of God the Father.

Did you hear how the passage began? Paul does not speak of individual happiness.

- He speaks of *something that is shared*... first of all shared in Christ.
- He speaks of this wonderful consolation that comes from being loved and loving.
- He speaks of knowing we are not alone and having partners in spirit.
- He speaks of sympathy we offer each other when we are not happy.
- He speaks of affection, which is to say, he speaks of love...
  - and we all know the hardship pain that a deep love can bring.



And he speaks of one more thing that will make his joy complete. To make his joy complete, the Philippian Christians are to put the good of others before their own selfish desires. “Don’t look to be happy by putting you own needs first,” he tells them, “But look to the interests of others. Be in the same mind frame as Christ, who did not seek the happiness of equal status with God,

safe and protected from harm and from death,  
remaining above the human condition with its troubles,  
temptations  
and cares.

**No.**

He emptied himself,  
placing the needs of humanity before his own.”

Paul never uses the word “happiness,” and maybe I am stretching it a bit to suggest that Jesus is sacrificing the happiness of staying at home with God by joining himself to the troubles and challenges of human life. But consider one more verse that speaks of joy; this one coming from the 12<sup>th</sup> chapter of Hebrews where the preacher says:

Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, who *for the joy* set before him *endured* the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.

“Who for the joy set before him, *endured*.”

For joy, one endures?

one suffers?

one sacrifices?

one places the needs of others before oneself?

For joy,

Jesus is willing to endure what surely can only be described  
as the unhappy experience of the cross?

I assure you, this is not a biblical bait and switch. This is not saying that  
up is down, left is right,  
good is bad, and dark is light.

No, please embrace happiness you feel at any time, so long as your happiness doesn’t come at the immoral experience of misery by others.

What Philippians is saying is what David Brooks is trying to say in his book, *The Second Mountain*. Brooks speaks to the joy that he has come to better know—that most people come to better know—in the second half of life. He celebrates the first mountain to be overcome in life which is more about individual achievement, fulfillment, and success... and, yes, is more about



being happy and fulfilled. We all need to explore who we are as individuals, what we are about, and how far we can go. And we often are happy when our climb up that mountain meets success.

But, regardless of how successful one is in climbing that first mountain, there comes a time for some people (and he would say the truly fortunate people) when they realize that it is not the mountain that means the most. There is a second mountain. And claiming this mountain means finding what Brooks sees as *joy*. It is realizing

- that there is something greater than oneself,
- that there is beauty in life beyond the beauty that one can find while living,
- that there is goodness that matters beyond one's own desires and needs.

It's a realization, frankly, that comes when we realize that we are mortal and are not going to live forever, and when we come to terms with it and that life is still worth living.

And so, one climbs this second mountain for oneself, but now even more for others... and ultimately for God. One still enjoys what one enjoys—  
good food and drink,  
a quiet vacation on the beach or an exciting vacation on the slopes,  
time alone doing what one enjoys doing by oneself—  
certainly embracing happiness when it comes.

But more and more,  
one yearns for,  
finds delight in,  
and gives one's life to  
what I hope hasn't become a clique-  
the greater good.

One helps build a community not just because family and friend are needed, but because everyone needs community—everyone needs some sense of belonging. And, strangely, living to help bring about blessings that one personally may not be able to see come about holds a strange thrill of doing for others what has nothing to do with me;  
children educated and given a better future;  
the poor fed and housed, and thus simply given a chance;  
adults being loved and somehow getting it that God's love reaching them,  
and thus, their becoming those who love others before themselves.

Because what makes life worth living is more other—oriented than selfish—more about the well-being of the world than living well, Brooks describes it as "*Moral Joy*."

Raising the possibility of knowing moral joy is the only authentic Gospel pitch for your being generous,



and the only legitimate Gospel pitch for you to be generous with the church...  
when you see the church being the community that promotes  
being generous with God's love for the sake of others,  
rather than the sake of the church itself.

I'll finish with a shameless but heartfelt personal pitch for supporting this congregation. I think I am speaking for many when I say this about myself. I am usually a happy guy, but often am unhappy. But I live with this sense that life is not meaningless and that love matters. I also live with a sense that I am part of a congregation that is meeting my own need to know I am loved by God, but also—I would say especially—because it is the community that shares God's love and makes a difference in the world for others. I thank God for the church that put me first when I was a child. But, as Paul has said, I have put aside those needs of a child. Now, more than ever, this church serves me because I know it is serving others,

It is serving my granddaughter putting her first,  
It is serving you,  
It is serving children at Highland Park Elementary  
and families through Family Promise,  
It is serving folks I will never meet  
And a future I will never see.

Do you share in that kind of appreciation for this community? If you do, that sharing is moral, joy.

